

EQUATORIAL ENCOUNTERS

Benjamin Romney—Department of Horticulture

Halloween night was a frightful time to be traveling to Ecuador. Any trip can create anxiety, yet going to a foreign land on this night left me apprehensive. It had been over twenty years since I lived as a missionary in Bolivia, and I had nearly died there from parasites and sorroche. Now I was returning to the region during the “witching” hours.

In Miami we waited an hour on the plane before the pilot announced that the clanging sound we had been listening to was a technician trying to repair a cargo door. Another hour of waiting, then another announcement—the flight was postponed. We de-planed, and waited in line to receive a meal and room voucher. After a quick call to Quito to let the hotel know I wouldn’t be there until tomorrow, I enjoyed one last meal stateside, and the day finally wound down at what the Latinos call the *madrugada*—those middle of the night, early haunting hours of the next day.

Our replacement plane was ready at 5:00 AM, so the comforts of the Radisson gave way to a quick rattle over to the airport, and as dawn broke we were soaring above the Caribbean, Cuba passing under wing. Eventually we left the ocean and flew across the mainland of South America towards Quito. The Andes were as beautiful as I remembered. Equatorial volcanoes, blanketed in white contradict the sweltering Amazon basin at their feet. Centuries of toil had created a patchwork of cultivation in the foothills. And it was these cool mountainside farms that attracted this new style of farmer. The Andes provide an ideal climate for roses, carnations, chrysanthemums. Combine this with the high availability and low price of labor, the convenience of modern air travel, not to forget the influence of the Andean Free Trade Agreement, and all ends leading to one road—the production of a very high percentage of the United State’s floral consumption. I yearned to see what made this possible. Now here I was, about to step into the beautiful, fertile fields near Cayambe, Ecuador.

Ecuador is a country filled with variety and mystery. One can travel quickly from the Pacific Coast into verdant volcanic valleys, then hop over the top, sliding down into the tropical soup of the Amazon basin. Money, politics, and geography are all extremely volatile. Within one month after I left, for example, the country’s president was ousted (this same president lunched in my hotel while I was staying there); taxi drivers shut the country down by parking their cars in the roadways in protest of inflationary fuel prices; and a volcanic eruption spewed forth enough ash to keep the airplanes grounded for two weeks. The dollar bought

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\$6,000 *Sucres* at the time of my visit. A month later it bought \$30,000. I saw fields of broccoli intended for our American tables, markets filled with herbs and vegetables we may never see in our lifetime, and I feasted on some of the finest French cuisine. The people of the Andes are tough skinned and soft hearted. Smiles are free for the taking, and fascinating crafts available for barter. The music is energetic and delicate, often soulfully wandering through *Quichua* love stories.

It was more than an adventure to find *Rosas Del Ecuador*. Imagine how I felt when I arrived at a modern office building in downtown Quito, thinking that my e-mails and phone calls had paved the way, and found the puzzled looks of a beleaguered sales staff when I announced that I had just arrived from Idaho to see where they grew the roses. It was more than luck that a dear gentleman, Ivan Hernandez, the owner, president, CEO, and whatever else he wanted to be called, happened to be there, instead of out on the farm. With characteristic Latino charm, he extended an invitation to his plantation the next day.

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It took most of the morning to find it. *Plantation* is a relative term. This particular plantation, or *finca*, consists of 40 hectares of greenhouses perched about 10,000 feet in elevation and straddled the equator. Half of the roses are grown in the northern hemisphere; the other half, in the southern. The driver I hired for the day was rather tall for an Ecuadorian. During our conversation I found out he was both a professional basketball player and a professor. Neither occupation had netted him enough income to survive the riddled economy, so he had invested in a car and hired out as a taxi driver. His wife ran a little restaurant in the front room of their house in Otavalo. He seemed especially glad to have some work. He told me that thieves had just stolen the television and all other valuables in their home. His cell phone wouldn't work because he hadn't been able to "buy minutes." But he had worked in a greenhouse as a teenager and proved most helpful in our adventures.

Ivan was a kind and generous host. He patiently explained the entire operation, answering my questions with pure delight. He was especially excited to show his favorite cultivars of newly developed roses. It takes 90 days—from the time the bud emerges until harvest—to develop the famously large Ecuadorian rose head. That same rose will be plucked from its comfort and packed tightly with 199 others, then whisked off to Miami in just a matter of hours. Most of the equipment was very modern and efficient. The water used in growing and processing the roses was purified, "more pure than your bottled water." Irrigation was controlled by a computer system. Plant nutrition was monitored by a laboratory facility on the premises. All batches of roses were tested for vase-life and quality. Every stem that left the facility was washed in a mild detergent solution.

Though they have mastered much of the modern greenhouse trade, there seemed to be some confusion about safety practices. I was startled by the way workers applied pesticides as we strolled through the facility. They were dressed like Darth Vaders in their protective suits, yet we wandered among them exposed, unprotected. They seemed to understand that those applying the pesticides needed to be careful, but those who were not applying the chemical apparently did not realize that they too were in danger. I suggested that perhaps we could view another greenhouse rather than waiting for the fog to clear in front of us. OSHA would have had a fit!

I suppose I could visit greenhouses almost anywhere and see the same plants growing. But these greenhouses were different from any I had seen in the States—tall fences, imposing gates, and guards with automatic weapons surrounded some plantations. One visit had us waiting for half an hour at gun point until the right person could be found within the compound to give us entry. I wasn't so sure I wanted to enter after that. Where Ivan had allowed me to visit his greenhouses taking pictures, videos, and written notes, Sergio stiffened when I took out the camera. He bristled at my request for photos, in fact denying me the opportunity. "But I only want to show my students how you handle the flowers." "No camera, I'm sorry." "But how about this one—it's electronic—no film in it." The ploy worked for a short pan over the facility with the palmcorder. The digital technology with which we are so familiar was still unknown to him. Yet a few minutes later he received a call on a cell phone at his waist, and quickly ended the tour. The workers at this same high tech greenhouse haul the flower buckets from the greenhouse to the packing shed on a cart pulled by burros, then place the flowers in state-of-the-art refrigeration rooms. The sorting facility is very modern and efficient, highlighting the paradox of South America—one can walk the streets of little villages and see someone talking on a cell phone while riding on the back of a donkey.

Why the guns, the guards, and all the secrecy? One wonders what other things may be growing within those walls. But, the truth be known, often these great measures are to protect the proprietary nature of new rose cultivars. These may take years to develop and moments to steal. A small piece of the right stem could net thousands of tissue-cultured plants surprisingly familiar in appearance but suddenly different in name. It is a tough business to have exclusivity of product and have such vulnerability. Hence, the plants are held captive; and the curious are held at bay.

As I returned to the States, it was blaringly apparent that the consumers of these "roses of the equator" know little of the effort made to create and market them. Our modern society is filled with consumers concerned with appearances. Driving down the flashy streets of Miami in a white

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Cadillac (the only car available with a large enough trunk for my huge suitcase) was an unpleasant contrast to the peaceful plantations I had just seen. People swarmed like ants in and around posh boutiques. Everywhere the look of hurried elegance. Even the beach teemed with life, bathed in idle hedonism. I found refuge in a botanical garden with mangroves and exotic palms.

The next morning I visited one of the largest flower brokerage houses in the country. Everything perishable passes through ultra-modern refrigerated warehouses—through customs, through x-rays, and then into waiting trucks or planes. By day's end the flowers were filling buckets all over the nation. The broker showed me the facility after all the workers had left. I could still sense the tension of the gadget-filled, yet empty salesroom. Projectors were poised like geckos on the ceiling, ready to cast numbers on the walls as marketers scrambled to find a home for every rose. Beneath us were huge coolers that fill and empty daily, a tide of flowers tightly bundled and boxed, ebbing and flowing to the rhythm of the salesroom above.

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We live in a world of rapid satisfaction. We demand perfection. Roses that aren't perfect are destroyed. A customer wants one yellow rose from the florist. The florist must buy twenty-five in a bunch. The wholesaler must buy boxes of hundreds. The grower shipped a pallet of 15,000. From Cayambe to Quito, Miami, Salt Lake, Idaho Falls and into the back of a Fedex van for a half-hour journey to our shop in Rexburg, bouncing along in cool darkness—the rose knows little of the smile it will soon reflect yet much of the many hands that brought it here. It is connected through lands of great contrast, grown by loving stewards, then coddled and tossed on its way to the nervous boy who stands at the door, waiting for his first prom date to come down the stairs. He gives the wrapped rose to her mother, hoping to make a good impression. She will raise it to her nose, smile, and dream for a moment of pleasant things but never know all the stories it could tell. ∞