

VOLUNTEER LIFE

Volunteer Life

Gringos Go on Vacation

By J. Grigsby Crawford

“There are known knowns. There are things we know that we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say, we know there are some things we know we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don’t know we don’t know.”

-Former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld

DRAMATIS PERSONAE:

First Person: Peace Corps Volunteer since February 2009; the author of this story

PCV#1: Male Peace Corps Volunteer in his early 30s; businessman

PCV#2: Female Peace Corps Volunteer in her late 20s; married to PCV#1

PCV#3: Unusually tall male Peace Corps Volunteer in his mid 20s

PCV#4: Unusually good-looking male Peace Corps Volunteer in his mid 20s

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We are gringos and we are going on vacation.

This is what we do.

We will find the finest hotels that \$14 a night can buy.

We will read books while

lying in hammocks.

We will eat your seafood, but if your seafood is not satisfactory, we will NOT return to your establishment.

We will drink your reasonably priced beers. But if your beers aren’t reasonably priced or chilled to our liking, we will not return to your beer-serving establishment.

We will ask whether hotels have hot water and if that water is not indeed piping-turn-your-flesh-red hot, we will take our Gringo Traveler business elsewhere.

(The Gringo Traveler is somewhat of a roaming professor of economics doling out lessons in capitalism.)

We will sit at tables with groups of other Peace Corps Volunteers and listen to them talk about other volunteers. (Because if volunteers spent as much time working as they spend talking about each other, this country would look like Switzerland.)

We will rub sunscreen onto each other’s backs so many times it will no longer feel vaguely homoerotic.

We will get cranky from being around each other so long and snap at each other, only to make up and be best buds all over again.

We will agree to disagree.

We will check the internet and bitch if the connection is not high speed quality. But most of all we will read news from back home and silently wonder what it is exactly we’re so anxious to get home to in four months.

We will have conversa-



A Booby minding his own Booby business

tions about who owes money to whom and pretend to not be uptight about it.

We will meet other Gringo Travelers and gringo café owners and other white travelers (some of whom aren’t from the U.S. and speak English as a second language and probably shouldn’t be referred

to as *gringos* but are anyway) and we will have conversations with them about their travels and then the conversation will turn to us and we'll explain who we are and what we do here for two—really? two? yeah, seriously, two—years and they will widen their eyes in pensive interest.

As if it even needs to be said, we Gringo Travelers will thumb through old copies of *The New Yorker* while reclining under a beach umbrella.

We will plan the week's activities with militaristic enthusiasm for timeliness, accuracy and efficiency.

I will feel the tristesse that comes from being around other people for so long and will cover it up by being more outgoing. Then I'll get home when it's all over and be so depressed and tired from all the pressure that I disappear into my apartment for a few days until the self-loathing wears off.

We will snap high resolution, low aperture, digital photographs of nature scenes that will likely merit sharing on an online social networking platform.

We will floss before bed.

We will take exotic day trips and if a travel agency even dreams of ripping us off or giving us something other than absolutely satisfactory service, we will be pissed.

We will nearly get sold fake bus tickets, but it will be all right in the end.

“We will fall in love with each other in a friends sort of way, with all of our flaws and charms stripped bare out in the open...”

We will discuss the exact definition of hemorrhoids and determine that what has plagued me for the last six months is in fact ‘swamp ass.’ (PCV#1 is somewhat of an authority on the issue.)

We will have arguments about Spanish grammar and people will get defensive.

We will laugh so hard it hurts.

We will fall in love with each other in a friends sort of way, with all of our flaws and charms stripped bare out in the open.

And we will eventually go home, because even for the Gringo Traveler, reality sets in and one realizes that vacation can't last forever.

First we're going to Ayampe, a small, quiet beach at the far south end of Manabí. After three days there, we'll go 15 minutes north to Puerto

López, where the beaches are far less pristine, but the town is more exciting.

The stretch of land between Guayaquil and Salinas is a shock to my system. It is so desolate and bare it is stunning. It's like Dust Bowl-era Oklahoma. It's like parts of Africa I've seen. It's ripe for a National Geographic photo shoot, but not in a good way. It's empty and dry and the signs that tell people not to litter aren't ha-ha funny or sad-funny or even sad; they are only cruel.

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During the voyage, I talk to PCVs#1, 2, 3, 4 about the importance of sunscreen. I am absolutely determined that none of us get burned. I've had a few incidents in the past where I thought the best way to 'get bronzed' would be to wear no sunscreen at all and let me say, it was a mistake.

I've packed a gloriously massive tube of SPF 50 Banana Boat and I'm already having obsessive thoughts about how I'll rub it in and be impervious to the sun's tropical glare.

Three days later PCV#4 will get so sick of hearing me and PCVs#1-3 say the words 'reapply' and 'rub in,' he will attempt to ban all verbs relating to sunscreen application.

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Ceviche (s_v_ch_; -ch_) *noun*: a South American dish

of marinated raw fish or seafood, typically garnished and served as an appetizer.

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PCV#4 is talking about *ceviche* with intensity—such intensity that I too am worried he will not get enough. Quite simply, PCV#4 is jonesing for some ceviche.

I've had ceviche just once in my life.

February 2010. I'm at a restaurant in Loja sitting across from a girl. It's a nice restaurant on the far end of town past the old church and on the way to the stadium. I'm tired. I look at the menu and it all looks expensive and unappetizing to me but I order the ceviche.

She is twenty-five years old and beautiful. Born and raised in Loja. She is the type of upper-class *Lojana* that would prefer to pretend like the parts of the country that my site is in don't exist. If I ever brought her to my site, she would be disgusted. She would unload an entire bottle of Purell by the time we reached my doorstep. Needless to say, she prefers her natural habitat of Loja and she sure as shit doesn't settle for no \$2 *almuerzos* with the commoners, so here we are in some fancy restaurant with white tablecloths that serves ceviche and it's a warm Sunday in Loja after a long night of dancing and drinking

whiskey.

She's so beautiful that other guys are always staring at her when we walk into restaurants and bars and she acts like she doesn't know why. She's so beautiful I'm digging into my US bank account funds for this ceviche lunch.

**“I've packed
a gloriously
massive tube of
SPF 50 Banana
Boat....”**

So beautiful I tolerate her smoking and even look at the way the plumes of smoke leave her lips and disappear above us and think it's... sexy.

After seeing her for many weeks I now feel comfortable telling her about my epididymal/prostatic infection and the ensuing pain that lasted six months and necessitated trips to Loja, Quito and, yes, multiple testicular sonograms. I also tell her about how last year I got pickpocketed but how it seriously wasn't a big deal because I only had like \$1.75 in my wallet and the other important stuff was stuffed away in my shoes and other pockets but how I was really just sad to lose the wallet because it had a picture of Che Guevara's face on it.

She laughs, but it's not a ha-ha laugh, it's a pity laugh. She smiles and leans over and kisses me and pours herself

another lemonade and barks something else at the waiter and then stares me in the eye and says, Why are you still in this country?

Some time later we sit in her living room eating big slices of mango for breakfast. Hanging on the wall in front of me is a giant painting of Jesus wearing a crown of thorns. The painting is so vivid and grotesque it looks as if the blood from his forehead could drip right off the wall and down onto the Persian rug.

Today's the day it ends and we can't be seeing each other anymore and I tell her this.

She is surprised when I tell her (which is strange since just weeks before she told me she had another boyfriend and in a few months was moving to Belgium to be with him [which is strange because he lives in Holland]). She leans toward me and I'm not sure if she wants to kiss me or tackle me. I look up at the Jesus painting.

Suddenly her cigarette smoking isn't sexy anymore.

All I can think is I should have ended this months ago on that Sunday when I ordered the bad ceviche.

I haven't eaten any ceviche since.

Back at the beach PCV#4 is still pining for it like a fiend.

We try to go back to the

same place he got his ceviche the night before but it's closed so we go to the only other restaurant in town and order shrimp. We make a toast and someone says, Not a bad way to spend Christmas Eve.

~

We finish lubing up and I announce with an enthusiasm that startles even me: There will not be a single sunburn on this trip!

(And any reader can see where this is going.)

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Christmas day. My brother and step-sister are on the phone. They're in Asheville and it's snowing.

My brother and I talk about how on January 1, 2011 in Vermont, he will propose to his girlfriend.

Being his only brother and he being my best friend, I believe I'm on the fast track for Best Man. (I mention this to PCVs#1&2 earlier in the trip and they ask me if I'm practicing for my speech at the wedding. I say that in a way I've been practicing for it my entire life. In other words, there will be all sorts of invisible pressure on me during that speech because I am the family talker, the entertainer, the smart aleck who can talk, and once you're the crowd-pleaser of the family—once you've been placed in that family role—there ain't no going back

to silent and mysterious, no matter how hard you try.)

But the important thing that comes of this is that when your older brother is getting

“I realize I haven't packed any snacks for the day and I feel the scaly hands of anxiety start to grip me.”

married and you aren't it means one thing and one thing only: He is an adult and You are a child. And all you can think is: Time to grow up.

I lie in the sand and before going back in the water I hike up my bathing suit to get some sun on my pasty white upper thighs. This is the single biggest mistake I will make in 2010.

~

Oh dear God!

It's evening and we've all taken showers and we're all in our beach hut staring at each other and we're all burned. Deep pink. Medium-rare. The stinging has already set in.

How could this have happened?

PCV#1 didn't put enough on his face. PCV#2 simply underestimated the sun's equatorial might. PCV#3 was sunburned from rafting before our trip even started, so that's moot. PCV#4 is looking toasty,

but not as bad as me and PCVs#1-3.

This wasn't for lack of reapplication. And there will be no hate mail sent to Banana Boat, Inc. I and at least two others of PCVs#1-4 are taking doxycycline. Not only are we taking it, but if we for some reason do not take it, we will be Medically Separated from the US Peace Corps.

We are taking doxycycline as a malaria prophylaxis. Like other antibiotics, a side effect of doxycycline is that it makes you more susceptible to sunburn.

We're already low on lotion. I have about one-half of a fluid ounce of aloe gel. PCV#2 has some lotion. PCV#4 has another bottle of lotion, but it's really runny and the writing on the bottle is in German. We use it anyway. The lotion is seriously scarce but we're all lubricating as much as we can.

Shortly thereafter we are scraping at the insides of bottles and tubes. Our use of the dwindling lotion products resembles drug addicts licking the insides of plastic baggies and sniffing at the carpet for one more bump.

Before dinner I'm lying down and I look at PCV#4's bottle of German lotion and I try to decipher the ingredients and I figure out that it's aftershave. And the only part of my body I haven't rubbed it on is my face.

We go off to dinner with our backs, chests, thighs and arms glistening with aftershave.

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We play games. We play cards, we play ping pong, we play a spinoff of Scrabble called Bananagrams that is addictively fun.

I am so incredibly competitive in every single thing I do that at this stage in my life winning has begun to embarrass me.

Five days later in a beach softball game, I will have blood running down my shins after diving for a catch in the outfield.

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Occasionally we wax nostalgic. We only have four months left here. We can't believe it. But the conversations fall short because nostalgia is longing for a place that doesn't exist and no one likes talking about it.

Also, one of us hasn't had a bowel movement in nearly five days.

Also, on Christmas Eve there is a bus crash outside Chone that kills 41 and injures 36.

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After Ayampe, we Gringo Travelers migrate 20 minutes north by bus to Puerto López, a bustling fishing village that is now a tourist destination because of its proximity to Parque Nacional Machalilla



Visitors brave the elements on the island

and the excellent whale-watching just off its coast.

Shortly after arriving, we run into another volunteer. She tells us that there will be maybe a dozen other volunteers showing up in town in the days preceding New Year's Eve. Even worse, some will be at the same hotel as us.

My knees buckle with terror.

This is not what we were hoping for. We were hoping to 'avoid the crowd.' This freaks all of us out, but especially me. Facing this many other Gringo Travelers at once will be unsettling, but right now I've got anxiety *in anticipation* of future anxiety.

This is a post swearing-in phenomenon for me. I was not such a freak back home. I used to *enjoy* crowds of people. Now they make me nervous like I can't breathe and I am going to have a heart attack and maybe also lose my mind.

The resulting behavior from me is incredibly rude: I avoid other gringos when we are in big gringo groups. People probably see me off to the side ignoring them and think that I think I'm 'too cool.' But I can assure the world that there is nothing more *uncool* than social anxiety.

~

One morning we wake up to the sound of the couple in the room next to us making love. PCV#3's bed is next to their wall and he informs us that it lasted nine minutes. Not bad, says PCV#1.

I walk into the hallway and I see the girl from that room tiptoeing half naked to the bathroom. Her face is flushed. She looks at me, giggles, and sort of covers up her bare breasts. Coming from her room I hear the Rolling Stones song 'Tumbling Dice' and I get a feeling somewhere between jealousy and loneliness.

~

Isla de la Plata is an island 40 clicks off the coast of Manabí. Sir Francis Drake hid his booty there in the 16th century, hence the name. Nowadays it's known as the Poor Man's Galápagos and Gringo Travelers take day trips here from Puerto López to fire off hundreds of photos of Blue-Footed Boobies, Red-Footed Boobies, albatrosses, frigate birds and other scenery.

We meet our guides at 9:30 on the beach. Our main guide is Humberto. He is a consummate professional and is 4'11". The other guide is Luis—also a consummate professional.

But first...

See the gringos getting their cameras ready. See the gringos lathering on their high Sun Protection Factor lotion. See the gringos filming things that should not be filmed, such as an authentic fish market and authentic Ecuadorian fishermen and our authentic sailing vessel, which is named not Santa Maria or La Milagrosa, but Island Tours.

See the gringos talk in their gringo language. See the gringos ooh and aah as real Ecuadorians hawk trinkets to them by the seaside. See the gringos take off their shoes and put on their life vests. See the gringos smile and laugh. See the gringos try not to slip and break their necks as

they climb onto Island Tours. Gringos. Gringos. Gringos. GRINGOS!

We get on the boat last. We sit in the back by the motor. I sit down next to PCV#1 and he looks at me and says, Why are you sitting so close to me? He says it as if I have just held a turd under his nose.

*“We’re rocking.
We’re rolling.
Everything is ON.”*

The Gringo Traveler invented Personal Space.

I'm sitting so close to PCV#1 because quite simply there is nowhere else to sit. But I scoot a few inches to my left anyway.

Now I'm sitting in a small puddle of water, meaning there's not enough cortisone in all of Ecuador to quell the rash that will be plaguing my ass tonight.

The boat ride will be a little under two hours. After approximately three minutes I decide I'm never getting on a boat again.

I have gotten sick in cars and buses and emitted streams of vomit that decorated the vehicle in a racing stripe of bile.

I have gotten sick on airplanes and filled complimentary Delta barf bags to capacity.

I have flown in a glider over the Mojave Desert, stumbled out of the cockpit and vomited at the base of a Joshua Tree.

I have gotten sick on sailboats, motorboats, ferry boats and Mexican parasailing boats.

It's been over a decade since I've had a true motion sickness incident and I don't want to break the streak today.

I've come prepared for the physical and psychological battle required to defeat the motion sickness.

I feel the nausea setting in and it becomes a form of warfare: me versus the sickness. I've packed three different anti-seasickness substances in my fanny pack. PCVs#1-3 mocked one of these because it is homeopathic and said I may as well rub an egg over myself. Needless to say, they also mocked my fanny pack.

I've already popped the Dramamine tablet, which is making me drowsy. I'm already chewing one ginger candy to settle the stomach. We are pitching front to back and to the right as swells hit Island Tours from the port side. The motors are too loud for me to listen to my iPod without

putting it at a volume that would cause long-term aural damage. My eyes are locked on the horizon.

I feel gas coming in my bowels and I know that even with the sea breeze this would be the Chernobyl of farts. So I hold it in.

Now I have my eyes locked on the horizon. My eyelids fight the drowsiness. My focus on the distant line where sea meets sky is trance-like. This will not happen to me today. Not here. Not now.

And then I feel the nauseous jolt in my abdomen and calmly ask PCV#2 if I can have her seat by the railing. At this point, PCV#1 is standing. This whole time, PCV#3 is *reading*.

PCV#2 scoots forward and I am by the railing. I chew another ginger candy. I try to breathe slowly and calmly, in through the nose and out through the mouth. It doesn't work. I feel the hot pang of anxiety coming over me and now I'm not so worried about the motion sickness per se as I am about having a full meltdown in front a group of over a dozen Gringo Travelers.

I am rubbing my thigh with my left hand in a mechanized Pavlovian device to avoid a crippling anxiety-induced incident. My other hand is reaching over the

side of the boat to feel the cool spray of seawater. I am sweating through my shirt. My lifejacket feels too tight, like it's restricting me from taking deep breaths.

I fear that I might lose my mind and in one fell swoop I'll vomit, tear off my lifejacket and begin writhing on the floor while the foul hull water sloshes over me and the Ecuadorian guides look on in disbelief.

The other Gringo Travelers would probably take pictures. This has happened to me before. I was once traveling alone in a barren corner of a forgotten continent and I passed out from altitude sickness and while I was lying on the floor of a restaurant being fed llama soup and coca leaf tea while taking hits from an oxygen mask, a table of Gringo Travelers... took pictures of me.

My eyes are still locked on the horizon. My hair is still soaked with sweat. My hands are white. My jaw is still clenched. My ass is itching.

My stare is stoic. I've been locked on the horizon this whole time and I'm sure I won't make it without causing a scene when all of a sudden...

LAND.

I am the first one off the boat. I stagger onto the beach and immediately drop to my knees. I roll over onto my back and stare up at the blue sky. The morning clouds have cleared and it's turning into a high SPF kind of day.

Everyone around me is smiling and adjusting their cameras and reapplying their sunscreen.

PCV#3 looks at me and says, What the hell are you



A Gringo Traveler examines the nostrils of a sea lion from three miles away

doing laying there?

PCVs#1-3 and I walk up to the guard station and—*quelle coincidence!*—we see some of our comrades: PCV#5 and PCV#6.

The world of the Gringo Traveler is a small one.

PCV#6 is in a newer omnibus. She is a sweet, kind girl who lives in the jungle but not close to either me or PCVs#1-3. She looks happy to be here.

PCV#5 is in our omnibus and he has a terrifyingly high amount of charisma. To put it simply, he has a smile that could make angels weep.

His name is Mike Moscarelli.

We exchange pleasantries with PCVs#5&6.

They paid \$30 apiece for their day trip island tours. We paid only \$25. (SUCKERS!)

PCVs#5&6 are off on their own walking tour.

Humberto and Luis direct our group over toward a map of the island and show us the two trails we can choose from. We will hike up 80 meters before we have to make a decision between the 5 km trail to our left and the 3.5 km trail to our right. I say openly I don't care which as long as I get to see lots of Blue-Footed Boobies.

I am informed that

I shouldn't worry, I will see plenty of Blue-Footed Boobies.

Throughout the day, Humberto will say, *Hola ¿cómo estás?* to each of the Boobies that he will pass by. But he doesn't do so ironically; it's like he's actually saying, Hello, and wants to know how the Boobies are feeling at this particular time and place.

This is merely the beginning of the anthropomorphism we will encounter today.

As Luis is pointing at the map (and Humberto is standing off

“I'm suspended in the water looking down at the coral and the passing fish when far below me, the strangest species of all comes into view...”

to the side, nodding his head up and down as if to say, *Wait till you guys get a load of these Boobies*) he mentions all the things we'll see. He mentions the sights. He mentions the birds. And lastly he mentions something that we won't be seeing:

He says that in this cove

there is normally a sea lion but right now he's off searching for colder water.

Then he says: This sea lion, he has no woman, he has no family. He is all alone.

We begin the hike.

Somewhere in the first few minutes of the hike I realize I haven't packed any snacks for the day and I feel the scaly hands of anxiety start to grip me.

But when I snap my first high resolution shot of an adult Booby taking care of his young, I know it's all going to be OK.

I will snap 58 more photos (at various camera settings) before the day is out.

Luis says, They are wild beasts, is it not true?

He is referring to the fact that we are not to go up super close and snap photos of the Boobies as if they are merely... animals. We are to quietly and gracefully pass by and not make a big scene vis-à-vis the Boobies. I agree we should give the Boobies their Booby space (and indeed have reservations about being on this island at all) but am worried that this close-but-not-too-close rule leaves a grey area that could result in a disastrous maneuver involving a clash of Gringo Travelers, Blue-Footed Boobies and technology.

I am at the back of our walking tour. Part of the reason I'm taking so many pictures is the life-long journey to come this close to the species I wrote a report on in the 2nd grade. Another reason is because I'm worried I haven't taken enough pictures during my time in Ecuador. Another reason is because I'm genuinely fascinated by the surroundings.

Every time PCV#3 and I stop to look at a new Booby family, I use a little Booby voice to say things like:

Oh don't mind me, I'm just a rare Booby with brilliant blue feet.

Or:

Nothing to see here! Just me and my little baby Boobies minding our own Booby business.

With their little golden eyes and long pointy beaks, this is what I actually imagine they are saying when they squawk in their Booby language.

Even I begin to think this is weird and I'm not really sure why I continue to do it.

The Poor Man's Galápagos has a surreal feel to it. It's a combination of landing on another planet and stepping into a nature documentary. It's Will Rogers State Park meets Mars.

See the desert island that's so arid a dropped match would raze all 12 square kilometers in



A trail sign like this may have multiple layers of meaning for the Gringo Traveler

a minute. See the many types of birds—not just the Boobies. See the postcard-like rocky cliffs that lead down to the turquoise ocean (perfect for the Gringo Traveler to pose in a photo for). See the rare tree, the rare flower, the rare lizard. But mostly: see the Boobies.

It's not long before I'm wondering who, actually, are the wild beasts.

The Boobies are quite literally minding their own business. And we have come to... stare at them.

And worst of all: We can barely subsist in this clime.

See the humans with bath towels draped over their heads. See the humans chugging bottled water—but not all at once because we're in a group of less than 20 on this island and

God knows what could happen to us out here. See the humans reapplying sunscreen at manic intervals. See the humans wearing sandals that have so many straps and buckles they might as well be shoes. See the human with not just a ten-inch lens but also binoculars. See the human with pockets on his vest, pockets on his shirt and pockets on his pants (pants which, by the way, *zip off and morph into shorts*). If we get stranded and die out here, it will not be for lack of pockets.

And, by the way, if we were to collapse and wither away and come to slow, parched deaths on this island, the Boobies would look at us like we're nothing but a bunch of freaks.

It's not long before I'm thinking about all of this existentially.

I'm reaching Vonnegut-esque conclusions about who we are and what this gawking apropos the Boobies says about us as human beings. We pass by more Boobies and their young and before long it all just starts to give me the creeps.

And then it happens. This is the nightmare. This is the grotesqueness that results from our invasion.

Luis is standing explaining to us how we are very lucky because on that tree off yonder we can see a very rare Red-Footed Booby and...

SQUAWK! SCREECH! Wings flutter. Feathers fly. Boobies are perturbed. The giant flower print hat from a female human being has been lifted off her human head by a gust of wind and landed directly on top of a family of Boobies that were just minding their own business.

I yell, Holy shit!

Others are giggling. I am not. I am scared this is going to be an incident. I am scared we've created a violation that will affect the future of the human-watching-Booby world. I am scared we're going to be on CNN.

The girl who owns the instrument of violation spends about two seconds looking scared but she has already converted her fear into

giggles. I am rarely the type of person who says 'Too soon' in reference to anything, but in my opinion, her laughing has come entirely... too soon.

There are more violent squawks and Booby thrashings and feathers aflutter. Every other Booby in a 50-meter radius has joined in on the riot of squawks. The hat just sits there, looking out of place. That flower print hat belongs nowhere on this island, nowhere in the universe of the Boobies. That hat belongs in this habitat like an iPhone belongs in a Dickens novel.

But Luis (still the consummate professional) puts up his hand as if to say, Settle the fuck down Gringo Travelers, I have this situation Under Control.

Luis calmly walks over to the Boobies and removes the hat. Unfortunately, instead of burning the hat and pissing on the ashes, he hands it back to the offender.

Before the incident, I had wanted to zoom in really close and take a picture of just the Booby's brilliant blue feet. But now that would just feel pornographic.

That is the dream of every Ecuadorian ecotourism guide, says Luis, to one day work in the Galápagos.

On the last leg of the hike, I'm talking to Luis and he tells me about the process

“Others are giggling.
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of schooling and certification he's gone through to get to the point he's at today. Being a guide on Isla de la Plata isn't bad, but to Luis it's like being in the Minor Leagues. It's like he and Humberto are hot Minor League prospects and if they keep plugging away and improving, maybe one day they'll get their shot at the Big Leagues: The Galápagos.

We climb back in the boat and have tuna sandwiches and pineapple and watermelon slices for lunch. Humberto asks us if we're ready to see some Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (?) and that's when a pair of glorious sea turtles approaches our boat and glides around in slow arcs near the water's surface. The Gringo Travelers lurch in unison to starboard and can barely unsheathe their cameras fast enough. I imagine what it would be like to jump in with the sea turtles and grab onto their shells and have them guide me through the water.

But then I see Humberto tossing watermelon chunks into the water where the sea turtles breach and open their big sea turtle mouths and eat the watermelon. I'm fairly certain this is a gross violation

of the most standard national park bylaws and it strikes me as the exact type of thing that could keep Humberto in the minor leagues.

We dive in the water with our snorkeling gear. We see schools of fish in brilliant colors pass by. We practice swimming down 15 or 20 feet and trying to touch the coral at the sea floor. PCV#3 is particularly adept at this.

Once, on the way back up from touching the bottom, I feel my Timex Expedition watch (water resistant up to 100 meters) slip away. The Velcro strap has come undone.

I don't panic. I come back to the surface and take a deep breath before diving back down again. My goggles are filling with water. Silt has been kicked up and the water is murky. The goggles are throwing off my depth perception. I'm blind down here!

But I persevere. I reach out with both hands. I squeeze them together and... success.

I reach the surface gasping and coughing up salt water. I yell to PCVs#1-3 that they won't believe what just happened. I swim to the boat and tell them my heroic story and they are... unimpressed.

It's almost time to get back in Island Tours and return to the mainland. I'm still out there



Two Gringo Travelers test the limits of technology

alone. I'm suspended in the water looking down at the coral and the passing fish when far below me, the strangest species of all comes into view: *Homo sapiens* (phylum: Gringo; genus: White European). It wears a bikini. It observes its surroundings with care. Its sunscreen is waterproof.

It breast strokes into my view and continues on its way as I stay suspended above, looking down, transfixed.

We're halfway back to shore now; we can see mainland South America in the distance. I am doing fine, biliously speaking. My eyes are locked on the mainland. PCV#1 is standing. PCV#3 is reading.

And then a human Gringo Traveler stumbles to the back of the boat, no more than two feet to my left, and launches a stream of vomit off into the foamy wake of our vessel.

I know what can happen next. I've instigated it before. One person pukes first and everyone else follows. In a chain reaction, all others within sight or smell—no matter how ironclad their equilibria—go down in succession, eyes bulging, foreheads sweating, stomachs hurling.

To prevent the Monty Python-style mass vomiting, I turn to the girl who just blew chunks and offer her my final ginger candy. She takes it and just holds it. I say, You need to chew it. She just looks at me. I yell above the noise of the motor, Chew it!

She unwraps it, puts it in her mouth and... spits it out into the ocean!

She has spewed my final ginger candy into the sea in disgust when anyone who's ever gotten motion sickness in their life knows that ginger is the one surefire way to settle the stomach during an episode

of nausea and vomiting.

I hope she keeps vomiting.

She doesn't.

But others do.

Another girl sitting port walks/crawls to the aft/port corner and barfs a fountain vomitus overboard as her friend looks on.

A grown man simply turns around in his abaft seat and hurls watermelon and tuna sandwich into the deep green sea.

A young man sitting starboard next to his girlfriend stands up and ralphs a symmetrical arc out into the Pacific.

Luis and Humberto are reading the newspaper.

PCV#2 and I are trying not to catch a glimpse of the upchuck party, in fear that we'll be the next ones, but it's basically impossible.

My second dose of Dramamine has kicked in and I'm in a drowsy haze with my eyes focused on the mainland. I make it.

~

That night we're at the bar on the beach and I leave to go to bed early because it has been a long day for this Gringo Traveler.

PCV#1 calls me a pussy because—like other varieties of gringo, such as the Fraternity

Brother gringo—it is the job of the Gringo Traveler to question the masculinity and/or heterosexual bona fides of anyone who drinks less alcohol than he.

~

Nearly a week into our vacation and our next month's living allowance still hasn't shown up in our Peace Corps bank accounts. This is a threat to the existence of the Gringo Traveler that sets off a wave of panic and scorn.

Up until now I have been surviving on the \$200 I stuffed in my shoes at the beginning of the trip, because if I were

“The world of the Gringo Traveler is a small one.”

getting robbed and assaulted and dragged naked out into the jungle to get clubbed to death, the thief would NEVER think to look under my shoe insoles in hopes of finding a wad of crisp \$20s!

They chose the worst month possible to screw with our living allowance, says one of us.

Yeah, I'd like to see these guys from the office live on \$11 [sic] a day, says another.

I'm checking my email tomorrow, and if there's not some sort of explanation, they'll hear from me, says someone else.

The next day, emails are checked and... Yes, there's an explanation. It involves a US bank and an Ecuadorian bank and feel free to guess which is responsible for the delay.

~

New Year's Eve.

Drinks by the beach. Beer. Tequila. We're rocking. We're rolling. Everything is ON. Lady Gaga. Pyrotechnics. Tiki torches.

I see a girl across the way. I want to get with her so bad I can taste it. We lock eyes. We talk. I know it's on. She knows it's on. Everyone in the bar knows it's on. We know that they know that we know it's on.

Three hours later, whether or not it is in fact 'on' is a matter for interpretation.

Things I learn in the waning seconds of 2010:

According to PCV#1, Will Smith and his wife are swingers. He says it's an open secret in Hollywood. He knows someone who knows someone who can confirm it.

According to PCV#3, Dennis Rodman has 'broken his dick several times.'

10... 9... 8... 7... 6... 5... 4... 3... 2...

We've done this before, haven't we.

~

On New Year's Day we walk through the ghost town trying to find a restaurant that's open early. First we try to go to the gringo hotspot owned by a gringo, which we've gone to every day since arriving. It's closed so we stagger back onto the empty boardwalk and find a place that looks much less appetizing. We sit down and a man who we thought was a drifter takes our orders. Back in the kitchen, a giant man is passed out face down on the concrete floor.

~

Los Frailes: The most pristine beach in all of Ecuador. The Gringo Traveler squeezes the final drops from his bottle of Banana Boat SPF 50 and feels a tinge of nostalgia when it's all gone.



A Booby, suave and pensive, monitors his surroundings

PCVs#3&4 and I swim out as far as we can go. Water so clear we can see down 20 feet

to the sea floor. Water so fresh I never want to get out. PCV#3 is trying to teach PCV#4 how to swim all the way down and touch the bottom. PCV#4 says he can't do it, his ears start to hurt. PCV#3 tells him he needs to equalize. I have no idea how to equalize.

We try to swim out farther and all we see are waves coming at us from the horizon. I say, Guys, let's just keep going out farther and farther away from shore, I'm pretty sure that's what dying feels like.

None of us, including me, is sure if I'm serious.

~

We never want to leave here. We never want vacation to end. We talk about staying forever. PCV#1 says, Eh, my counterparts would get suspicious and start calling after a couple days. I think that at my site I could bleed to death on my morning jog and not have anyone notice for weeks.

~

On the inside of the doors in our hotel, there is a sign that says in English and Spanish, In Puerto López, water is primordial.

Primordial (pr 'môrd l) *adjective*: existing at or from the beginning of time; primeval.

~

On our last full day in Puerto

“We never want to leave here. We never want vacation to end. We talk about staying forever.”

López I wake up sick but not sick from drinking, because I didn't drink last night. This is just my body saying, Vacation's over, time to go home.

This—being sick on vacation—is not new to me. I have been seasick in the San Juans. I've eaten bad surf 'n' turf in the Caymans. I've had issues with lack of SPF in Costa Rica. I've gone two weeks without a bowel movement in China. I've been lovesick in Holland.

Here in Puerto López I believe my soul is sick.

PCV#1 says I'm being a wimp because I want to stay behind at the hotel alone while they go hiking. Later today when we're sitting in the sand and I turn to my left and vomit apples and bananas, PCV#1 says, I guess he wasn't exaggerating, maybe I was a little tough on him. In the way that people do around sick or drunk or loathsome people, the five others around me start to talk as if I'm not even there.

Later in the day, PCV#1 is limping for some reason. PCV#2 is moping but I'm not sure why. PCV#4 is already gone either because he got sick of us or

because he wanted to see his girlfriend in Quito. PCV#3 is oblivious. We are no longer humans. We are machines that apply sunscreen, eat and take showers.

We have vacationed ourselves into submission.

Earlier in the day I stay back at the hotel alone. I lie in the hammock peeling baseball card-sized flakes of skin off my upper thighs and reading. I'm reading Frank McCourt's memoir *Angela's Ashes*, which is basically like soft-core porn for anyone who's ever taken a college creative writing class.

As I lie there reading, I put down the book, peel off another flake of skin the size of a Post-it and think. I'm thinking about all the experiences and choices you've ever made and how they all amount to what you are today and how there's a possibility that when you do all the addition it might add up to failure. The failure means you might not be as good of a person as you think you are.

This sense of doom paralyzes me as I lie with the book on my lap and the flakes of burnt upper thigh flapping in the breeze. The doom is heavy; and just when my lungs feel like they're filling up with lead and I can hardly breathe, my brother calls. And...

SHE SAID YES!?

Yes! She said yes!

She's on the phone with

him now. One more time for good measure, I yelp: SHE SAID YES!

~

It's coming to an end. I leave to buy my bus ticket for the following morning. On my way out, the housekeeper goes into our room. When I get back, the room is wide open but the housekeeper is gone. I'm pretty sure this is a case of gross housekeeping negligence, especially since the room of the Gringo Traveler is nothing short of a stockpile of tech-

"We have vacationed ourselves into submission."

nology. I check to see that the mountain of cell phones and iPods on the dresser is intact. I lay down and eventually the housekeeper comes back to collect her things.

No one else is in the room. I leave the bathroom after another bowel movement. I won't say how many separate bowel movements I've had this morning because that would be crass; let me just say there were seven flushes total.

I stand naked in front of the mirror.

See the hair standing on end from the body oils and sea salt. See the beard, unshaven for 12 days. See the chest, orange and crispy

with a squirrel's tail of hair stretching longitudinally. See the legs, skinny and hairy. See the dramatic jump between red and pasty white, making it look like I'm still wearing underwear. See the hazel eyes. See the tired shoulders. See scars on the forehead and the arm and the leg and the shoulder blade.

Think about the sea lion: *He has no woman, he has no family, he is all alone.*

-Crawford, a Natural Resource Conservation Volunteer from Omnibus 101, lives in Zamora Chinchipe. This is his final issue as Editor-in-Chief of El Clima; he will complete his service in April 2011.

*The Adventures of MacGyver,
Part II
MacGyver in the Bathroom
By Alex Pellett*

Q: What does MacGyver do in the bathroom?

A: Whatever it takes.

Ever find yourself in a bind while partially nude in a compromising position with no one to help? Don't despair. By following the example of MacGyver, these problems can be resolved without foul language, the use of guns or minimal violence.

MacGyver¹ is a perfect model for the Peace Corps Vol-