

The original idea for the trip I am going to tell you about was follow Charles Darwin's voyage on the H.M.S. Beagle in the 1830s up the coast of South America from where I'd stopped off in Chili, and then to the Gallapagos Islands.

But after the trouble in Panama stirred up the Peruvians and the drug question upset their already delicate dispositions, I switched plans and used Quito, the capital of Ecuador, as a layover from which to fly to the Gallapagos.

Quito is 9000 feet above sea level. The hotels don't have heat or air conditioning. The tourist bureau claims the temperature stays about 70 degrees F. Chambers of commerce and tourist agencies, I've found, are somewhere between six and seven percent correct in quoting local climate conditions; however, judging from the clothes the citizens were wearing, and their flesh condition for March, I didn't suspect that they'd had a hard winter.

Visitors to Quito are warned to take it easy and eat lightly until they adjust to the high altitude. Down the street from the hotel I found a tavern that served traditional Ecuadorian food.

By "traditional," I mean that the cook had the same leanings as the old time shearing camp cooks did when I was a boy. His soup stocks were based on beef hooves, and the stew had its start from the linings of sheep's stomach.

The soup is called "sancocho." It is made from animal hooves, yucca, white corn on the cob and green onions. The only dishes that tasted familiar were a boiled corn recipe served on a shuck called a "humite," and a tamale made of chicken wrapped in a banana leaf like they do in tropical Mexico and Central America.

The city was holding a festival to prepare for Lent when I arrived. I don't know how the custom started, and no one else did that I talked to; but all over town, folks were throwing buckets of water and water balloons at each other from pickups and the sidewalks.

In the plazas, boy and girls were being tossed into the fountains, I was all in the spirit of fun. Beer drinkers at the sidewalk places were ready for targets, and the biggest danger was to be run down by a citizen scurrying to keep dry.

I wish President Bush and I were on closer terms so we could coordinate his problems where they wouldn't conflict with my projects. I didn't see any Norte-Americanos eating sancocho, but I bet it would've been a big help in keeping them on a diet.