



vendors sell votive candles and flowers.

He admits that Cuenca does not have the obvious needs of Peru as a whole. "We have a better economy. Peruvians who come here to work for a month make as much as they earn in a year. But we have our projects. It is the South American nature to help others. Rotary gives us a framework. We have 28 members, 3 of whom are surgeons. Perhaps because of that, the club focuses on helping children with cleft lips and palates. There is an unusually high incidence of these birth defects in the area. We work with several different hospitals and do an average of 10 operations a month. We pay for the operating rooms, about \$100 per child. Last month, we did a focused campaign—60 children in a week. The military let us use their hospital. Women for World Health, a group from California, brought in equipment and supplies."

The Cuenca Patrimonio club also focuses on specific villages, treating children from the region of El Oriente (in eastern Ecuador by the Amazon) and Loja. The help extends to follow-up operations and speech and physical therapy. "In all, it is our goal to perform 250 to 300 surgeries a year," he says. "Some agencies, like the Institute for Families and Children, help with the cost. We are trying to raise \$30,000 to \$40,000 for next year."

QUITO, ECUADOR We make our way to the Turtle's Head, a biker bar crossed with an English pub by way of Rick's Café Américain in Casablanca. At midnight, we are to meet with Henry, a man who speaks no English but has a reputation for getting things done

that no one else can. We're joined by Nathaly Montaldo, a Rotary Youth Exchange student who had lived with the Hodges in Newport News as a teenager. Eight years later, she's a lawyer—and for tonight, our translator. Huddled over a small table, Ken and Nathaly work out the deal for shipping our motorcycles from Quito to Panama.

I have one day to find Rotary in Quito, a city that's about 30 miles long and 5 miles wide, that snakes between mountains and up valleys cut by rivers. I attend the Friday morning meeting of the Rotary Club of Quito-Valle Interocéánico held in the lower floor of the Swissôtel. It is a place of attentive service, polished brass, and white linen, men and women dressed in immaculate business attire, there to plot and applaud good deeds. It is their last meeting of the year.

A representative from the district stands up. The only words I understand are "Bill Gates," a concept that needs no translation.

Evelyn Falck, my breakfast companion and contact, heads the foundation run by the club. She says simply, "Imagine 69 clubs in Ecuador agreeing on anything."

The club has just finished building a \$600,000 clinic and community development center in Cumbayá, a town swallowed by the expanding Quito. The plaque of donors includes 27 Rotary clubs in the United States and dozens of corporations and individuals.

The club president introduces Darrell R. Stokes, a biology professor from Emory University in Atlanta, who is presenting a check for the club's Children of the Andes project. While watching CNN, Stokes

heard a report that the population of Atlanta was increasing by 93 Spanish-speaking people per day. He wondered how to adapt to the future. He applied for and obtained a Rotary Grant for University Teachers and came to Quito. He ran into Odd Hanssen, a Norwegian expatriate and member of the Quito-Valle Interocéánico club. Stokes returned to Atlanta, talked the Rotary Club of Vinings, Ga., into hosting an auction of Ecuadorian products (everything from artwork to jars of jam), then persuaded a fraternity and sorority at Emory to make Children of the Andes their community service project. The result: He is here to present a check for \$25,000 to the club. In return, he receives a hand-drawn letter of thanks from one of the children. It's a good trade.

He describes the project. Children of the Andes has opened seven preschools. "Before you can contemplate education, you have to address health. These kids come to us with an incredible parasite load. We engage the families. We offer nutritional support, improve the water, clean the house, treat the brothers, the sisters, so they are well enough to attend school."

They receive school uniforms and supplies and are able to take their first steps toward the future. Children of the Andes kids emerge from the program well prepared. Stokes conveys the poverty of the general educational system with a single fact: He'd taught at a university in Quito, one of the nation's best, but only the professors had textbooks.

Karin Schneewind, another club member, offers to give us a lift over to club headquarters, and while driving fills in additional



Above: The group crosses into Ecuador. We would still draw curious glances in Quito (below), but two weeks into the ride, we moved at a slower pace.

Opposite: We watch the nightlife in Macará (upper left) while our chef (lower right) prepares dinner. An indigenous woman at a coffee stop in the Andes (upper right). A flower vendor in Cuenca (lower left).





Above and below: Clubs in Quito focus on children. These faces show why. At Refugio, street children learn crafts, sewing (above), baking, gardening, and carpentry. There's also time for play (below).

Opposite: A boy serves others (upper right) before enjoying a hot meal (lower left). In Escazú, a volunteer at Sister Charity's home for disabled children shares a Christmas dessert with a new friend (upper left, lower right).



details. "Our first school, we took over an abandoned one-room schoolhouse. Some started from scratch, some with provincial help. Now we are raising money to purchase land to begin construction of an elementary school. We hope to add a grade a year. I admire the Rotary approach. We do not give money to people on the street or on top. We work on projects that will change things from the bottom."

Hence the modern clinic in Cumbayá. "We raised over \$270,000," she says. "We publicize the clinic on the radio. We have to put the Rotary name out there. Everyone is welcome."

I follow Miguel and Evelyn Falck and Stokes back to the club offices, where they load vans with Christmas gifts and food for the inhabitants of Las Manchas, a coastal town. The families, dependent on a dwindling conch population, have fallen on hard times. The club is working with the fishermen, exploring alternatives.

Stokes' enthusiasm is contagious, and not the first I've encountered. When word of this motorcycle trip got out, I'd received e-mails from Americans who had fallen under the spell of *Rotario*. Susette Goff, of the Rotary Club of Yorktown, Va., sent me a stirring account of her nine years with Refugio de Los Sueños, a safe house for children located in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Quito. She told of a recent project, and of the power of small acts to change the environment in which the kids lived. Jim Sawhill, the 2007-08 Yorktown club president, and a team of six volunteers had repainted the

shelter a vivid yellow. As the children said when they saw it, "*Es el color de alegría y del sol*." ("It's the color of happiness and sunshine.") Goff gave me the name and contact information of Myriam Montero, a member of the Rotary Club of Quito Metropolitano.

Montero describes her club, one of the youngest in Quito: "We reflect the shift in culture. The oldest clubs don't admit women. Ours does. We are also younger, many of the members in their 40s. We met Goff at the District 4400 Project Fair, an exposition where neighborhoods lay out their needs and try to match them to interested parties. We stepped in to be the local club working with Refugio. We've put in hot water, showers, and upgraded the electrical. We also maintain a shelter for homeless kids in Quito. The city gave us a house, and we converted it to take in children at night."

At my request, Myriam teaches me a new Spanish phrase: *Míname y sonríe*—"Look at me and smile."

Imagine seven San Franciscos, laid end to end, or maybe one on top of another. That's Quito. Myriam pilots her car up increasingly steep slopes, cobblestone thoroughfares she has to traverse, going curb to curb. She knows the general direction (up) but has to ask directions to the neighborhood of Toctivco. Most people are helpful, pointing farther up the mountain. We zigzag and scrape our way beyond the invisible line that taxi drivers refuse to cross and eventually find the yellow building that houses Refugio.

The club in Yorktown had sent me two slides, before-and-

after shots of the paint job. Nothing prepared me for the kids. We pull into the playground. A few girls are playing soccer on the hard surface. I step out of the car, and children swarm, getting hugs and giving them to Myriam. One boy sees what I do to recall a photo and follows me for the rest of the visit, his fingers darting in to press buttons, rewind, multiple image, single image, so his friends can see themselves. Myriam explains that Refugio is a shelter for the children of prostitutes, drug addicts, abusive parents, and the seriously poor. It offers a safe haven after school lets out but closes at 5 p.m., when the staff goes home because of safety concerns. The kids wander back on the street to whatever passes for home. Over the years, the shelter has expanded its offerings. The staff teaches sewing, weaving, gardening, baking, carpentry, and construction. Older kids spread mortar over a new room in back. A water heater will provide hot showers, the first the kids have ever experienced.

I've arrived in time for the afternoon meal. A tiny boy brings out huge bowls of soup from the kitchen, then sits alone in a corner to feed himself. I recite my mantra: This is heart-breaking, heartmaking work.

The next morning, we catch a flight to Panama City. Near the office where we pay a departure tax, a Plexiglass box with a Rotary emblem asks travelers to donate leftover currency. It is a final reminder of need in South America.

On the plane, I pull out my map of Central America on which I've listed projects funded with help from The Rotary