



Larry Benjamin

There are volunteers, and then there are volunteers.

Pastor Larry Benjamin of the Nazarene Church of Heppner not only endured missed planes, long hours of waiting and a bout with dysentery to help build a chapel in Ecuador, but his church paid for the privilege of him doing it.

Benjamin left Heppner in mid-January for a two-week stint on a "work and witness" team in Ecuador. The team was comprised of 41 people, 33 pastors and eight of their wives. Getting to Ecuador proved to be the first hurdle—every flight was late. Benjamin left Spokane an hour late on a flight to Chicago. From Chicago he flew to Miami and was scheduled to fly from Miami to Quito, the capital of Ecuador. But, the plane had problems with the landing gear and his team was forced to switch planes. The pilot of the chartered plane, however, believed that his passengers were already in Ecuador and his mission was to bring them back to the States. He was finally contacted somewhere over Cuba. In the meantime the team members got word that war had broken out in the Gulf. Benjamin said that one of the pastors had a son in the Middle East and most everyone else had people there. He said they got very little information about the war at first, because they had only a small portable radio.

The team finally took off for Ecuador—12 hours late. En route, however, the captain of their plane informed them that because they had taken off so late, they would be unable to land in Quito, because the Quito airport closes at 11 p.m. Benjamin said that the 11 p.m. closure is probably because the elevation at Quito is 10,000 feet, and Quito is surrounded by higher mountains. "You don't work fast there because of the altitude," said Benjamin. "It's really easy to run out of air."

The team landed at Guayaquil a seaport city by a bay, and then traveled to Quito, where they spent about a week building a chapel.

Besides their work for the church, the team was able to tour a little of Ecuador, which ranges from desert which was "much drier than Heppner" with cactus six to eight feet tall to areas with palm trees to equatorial jungle. (The Spanish word for equator, is equador, he noted.) The group took a tour down the Amazon in a canoe, visited a preserve with monkeys, was offered a chance to hold a live boa constrictor—which Benjamin turned down, and watched natives mine for gold. Some of the Ecuadorian people looked very Hispanic, while others very Indian. Benjamin said that many of the natives were descendants of the Aztec especially farther back in the jungle, and some spoke no Spanish, but only Indian dialects. The people there were very short, with some of the taller ones reaching only five feet.

A six-foot-six pastor travelling with the group on a shopping trip aroused much curiosity on behalf of the Ecuadorian people.

The inflation rate in Ecuador was so bad that the people no longer use metal coins. Benjamin said that the exchange rate was 940 sucres, (the Ecuadorian dollar) to one American dollar when they arrived, but had risen to 1,040 sucres to one dollar when they left. He said it was difficult getting used to prices, with items in the shops priced in the thousands. The biggest bill was 5,000 sucres. He said that the average weekly wage in Ecuador was \$14 a week.

During his stay there, the mission team stayed most of the time in mission compounds, except for a few trips during which they stayed in motels. The missionaries who hosted the teams were very protective of their visitors as far as the food they encountered and warned them against eating anything except food that was prepared by missionaries themselves. Benjamin said that street vendors sell food which is served on regular plates, rather than disposables. The plates however, were not sanitized, but were dipped in a bucket of water in between customers. When team members did eat but, the missionaries tried to scrupulously check the restaurants ahead of time. Unfortunately the missionaries were incorrect on one—the last night the group was in

Pastor Benjamin helps build chapel in Ecuador

Ecuador they were taken to a "really elaborate restaurant, with the waiters in tuxes and music," and Benjamin ended up with dysentery. The food in Ecuador was not Mexican, said Benjamin and was not too much different than that in the U.S. Chicken and pig were the main meats, but the Ecuadorians "didn't have all the desserts and sweets." Rice was a staple. Vegetable markets were set up much like carnivals, he said, with booths and meat was often hung out in the open air with no refrigeration. An encounter with a roasted pig head in a meat market, proved to be very unappetizing. Because the water was so bad the Americans drank Coke, Fanta Orange, Sprite and mineral water out

of bottles. Diet Coke was very hard to come by, he said. Dysentery is common there, and the missionaries said they expected to get it once or twice a month, despite precautions. The regulations on medicines in the U.S. do not exist in Ecuador and medicines can be purchased over the counter without prescriptions. One man became so ill while in Ecuador that a doctor had to be called. The doctor, however, just handed the man a packet with a syringe and then left, expecting the man to inject his own medicine.

The major modes of transportation, besides walking, are cars, taxis, and city buses, which travel into the country as well as the city. "We don't know what a crowded bus is,"

said Benjamin, commenting that "it is nothing to see people standing in the aisles and doors of buses. The top of one bus, he said was completely covered with chicken boxes. The mission teams were transported mostly by bus and Surburbans.

While the Ecuadorian population is predominantly Catholic, the Mormon faith is relatively strong and the Nazarenes "are coming along." The church population is growing faster than the number of churches and lay people are often ministers. Benjamin said he saw 10 church buildings that had been built by different mission teams. The buildings and upper class houses there are made of cinder block and stucco, and even the power poles were made of cement.

In lower class housing areas, the houses were made of bamboo with thatched roofs, then bamboo with galvanized metal roofs, then cinder block and from then on the size of the house reflected social position. A lot of the poorer homes were as small as 10 feet square. And it was common to see eight or 10 children in such a home, Benjamin said. He said that Guayaquil has large "invasion areas" or slums of bamboo shacks which were thrown up by the very poor and then torn down by the police. When the police get tired of tearing the shacks down the squatters claim the property. The invasions are so large in Guayaquil that the real population is undetermined. "Electrical service in Ecuador is very unreliable," said Benjamin,

with voltage ranging from 175 to 218 on which is supposed to be 220 volts.

If the houses had any heat, it was supplied by a fire place. The climate in the desert was, of course hot and dry, but Guayaquil was hot and humid and Quito was cool in the morning, but warm in the afternoon.

Benjamin's trip back "was very uneventful, almost a letdown," he said. The worst didn't come, however, until he had arrived home and had a reaction to the medicine he had been given in Ecuador for his dysentery.

A dinner is planned at the Church of the Nazarene April 7 at which time Benjamin will show slides of his trip.

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