

ECUADOR NEWS - TOURISM

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A Gathering Force

Part one in a three-part series on accessible tourism in Ecuador

BY LANCE BRASHEAR
LBRASHEAR@HOY.COM.EC

Lee Hagmeier recently completed a three-week tour of Ecuador. He toured Quito and the surrounding area, took a week-long trip to Galapagos, followed by five days in the jungle, and then a weekend trip near Otavalo. Though he visited all of these places Hagmeier actually did not see any of them. He is completely blind.

Much of Ecuador's richness is found in its imagery – the landscapes, the colors, and the wildlife. So, why come if you cannot see it?

If you take a walk with Hagmeier he will open your eyes to show you just how closed they were to begin with.

THE ABSENCE OF SPACE

Hagmeier was traveling with a group from the United States organized by an Ecuadorian tourism agency, Nuevo Mundo Expeditions. As they toured the city of Quito, he shared some insight.

"With sensory deprivation its more meaningful to be here... You get a sense of the movement and people and the background of the culture." And with the noise and activity of mid-morning in El Centro he added, "This is kind of a bustling city."

But as the tour distanced itself from the bustle and made its way to La Ronda, an old, pedestrian cobblestone, street he noted what many people notice initially: the texture of the stone pavement and the absence of traffic. But without sight he also sensed the narrowness of the street and the two and three story houses on each side and said, "I would probably feel like I'm in a canyon and it echoes from both sides."

Hagmeier is aware of subtle changes in his surroundings, which others interpret through visual cues, such as walking by a parked car. He talked about blindness giving him a more refined sense of sound, even when there seemed to be none. "What I pick up," he explained, "is the absence of space."

LOOKING FOR SPACE

Hagmeier is one of the millions of disabled travelers who seek new experiences, just as able-bodied tourists do. But Hagmeier is more fortunate in some respects. Despite being blind and approaching 70 years of age, he does not need any special accommodations, only sighted guide, which was provided by a fellow traveler in Ecuador. Many disabled tourists, though, do

need other arrangements.

Jean Burdette came to Ecuador in January with a group of ten tourists, the majority of whom were confined to wheelchairs. Burdette operates Wings on Wheels, a travel agency which specializes in accessible tourism, or tourism designed for disabled travelers.

Though the number of accessible tourism agencies is very small, disabled persons can find entities which take them to the most exotic places on the planet. Burdette has taken disabled tourists to Egypt, China, New Zealand, Kenya, Tobago, Holland, Germany, Cypress, and Malta.

When she searched for opportunities to visit Latin America Burdette discovered Ecuador For All, a receiving tour agency, which navigated the group from the sierra to the Amazon. That is no easy task in Ecuador, which, like most Latin American countries, is very inaccessible and unfriendly to wheelchairs.

disabled travelers. Nuevo Mundo Expeditions, owned and operated by Oswaldo Muñoz, has been welcoming disabled tourists for years. Though he does not specialize in receiving groups of disabled visitors, he has assisted individual tourists who have hearing disabilities by using cue cards during walking tours of Quito. He has incorporated families into his tours that have an intellectually disabled member and he accommodates wheelchairs on the Manatee Explorer, a river boat operating on the Napo River.

In Muñoz's view, assisting disabled travelers is not a choice. "If you're running eco-tourism which is respect the culture, respect the environment, you should also respect and accommodate the traveler."

Accessible tourism agencies in South America

- ECUADOR FOR ALL** (Ecuador) www.ecuadorforall.com / www.huasquila.com
- ACCESSIBLE JOURNEYS** (US based with trips to Peru & Chile), www.disabilitytravel.com
- AMAPI EXPEDITIONS** (Chile & Argentina) <http://travel-chile-argentina.korke.com>
- LOS TROGONES TRAVEL AGENCY** (Costa Rica) www.catalogosdigitales.com
- PARATRANSIT TOUR SERVICE** (Costa Rica) www.gowithwheelchairs.com
- ACCESSIBLE MEXICO** (Mexico) www.accessiblemexico.com.



ACCESSIBILITY Lee Hagmeier, a blind tourist from the United States, recently toured Ecuador, including the Galapagos Islands.

BY THE NUMBERS

Disabilities fall into four general categories: physical, visual, auditory, and intellectual. Put together, people suffering from some form of disability number approximately 650 million worldwide, or 10-12% of the population, according to World Bank estimates.

One can find agencies in Ecuador that accommodate individual,



PLEASE MAKE ROOM Accessible tourism is one of the largest tourism trends for the future. Above: disabled tourists in Quito.

Next Week
Part Two

Accessibility in Ecuador for national and international tourists

The majority of tourism dollars in Ecuador are generated by incoming foreigners, principally travelers from the United States. The U.S. is a country with 54 million disabled persons, including 3.3 million wheelchair users and another 10 million who need a device such as crutches or a walker to assist them in moving about.

Though statistics about the blind are more difficult to ascertain, the American Foundation for the Blind estimates more than 25 million people have uncorrected vision problems or cannot see at all. But how many of these disabled persons actually travel and generate tourism revenue?

The Open Doors Organization (www.opendoorsnfp.org), with the assistance of Harris Interactive polling, has been tracking disabled travel in the U.S. since 2001. They estimate that disabled people spent \$13.6 billion on 31 million trips during 2009. Persons with disabilities, like anyone, have income, savings, and pensions. They also rarely travel alone, which doubles the potential revenue of any operator willing to receive a disabled tourist. So, if they have money and will travel, where are they going?

Turning again to Harris studies, more than half of disabled travelers who have traveled at least once in their lifetime have visited Canada and Mexico. One in four has visited Germany, England, or France. And almost one out of three has been to the Caribbean.

Why the Caribbean? Because cruise lines are the most advanced tourism operators providing accessibility to the disabled. From wheelchair accessible rooms to dialysis units aboard ships (www.dialysisatsea.com), cruise lines figured out long ago how to serve this market and built facilities to accommodate disabled tourists alongside able-bodied travelers.

Though Ecuador is barely on the radar for accessible tourism destinations, the profile of the most frequent visitors to Ecuador indicates that this will be a force to contend with in the very near future.

A GATHERING FORCE

Recent statistics show that Ecuador received just over one million visitors last year and three out of five, or 60 percent, were over the age of 65. Although the majority of them may not have

- Websites for disabled travel**
- www.travelfordisabled.com
 - www.abilitytrip.com
 - www.disabledtravelers.com
 - www.accessable.com
 - www.accesstravelcenter.com
 - www.cruisecheap.com

been disabled, we know that eventually they will be.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities estimates that individuals in countries with life expectancies over 70 years will spend, on average, eight years of their life living with a disability. And since the largest number of travelers to Ecuador comes from the United States, a sobering realization emerges that tourism operators in Ecuador cannot ignore:

On January 1st of this year, the baby boomer generation in America began to turn 65. There are 78 million of them (those born between 1946 and 1964) and they are retiring at the rate of 11,000 every day for the next 18 years.

Effectively, disabled travelers represent the largest untapped market in tourism in the coming decades.

When wheelchair bound travelers are able to visit the Amazon and blind men travel to the Galapagos, the barriers for persons with disabilities seem surmountable. As operators and agencies begin to recognize that traveling is just as enjoyable, fulfilling, and lucrative for disabled persons as it is for able-bodied tourists, surely more of them will begin to hear what Lee Hagmeier has heard all his life - that absence of space, swelling and gathering and looking for a place to visit.

Tourism Guide of Ecuador

COAST

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info@haciendahatoverde.com

GALAPAGOS

HOTEL SOLYMAR (Santa Cruz Island)
05-252-4418/4415
www.hotelsolymar.com.ec
info@hotelsolymar.com.ec

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www.haciendaabraspungo.com
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