



## Staff Page - Where Are They and what are they doing now?



### ► Culture and Mountaineering in Ecuador

This winter I was lucky enough to travel to Ecuador for a few months with Irene Bailey and another friend from California. It was my first true international traveling experience and I was excited at the opportunity to learn about Ecuadorian culture and customs and practice my very rusty Spanish skills.

#### Ken Gates - MYE Instructor and Mountaineer

The only set plans I had when I left the States were to work on an organic farm in the Amazon for a few weeks and take a 24-day mountaineering course through an Alaskan company. Of all the things I wanted to do in Ecuador, I think the prospect of learning how to climb 20,000ft peaks was the most exciting to me at the time.



Over the winter I began to prepare myself for the physical challenges ahead by going to the gym or running a few miles as part of my daily routine. A few months later I flew down to Ecuador and met up with Irene. We traveled for a month together and then I went off to my mountaineering course and Irene went to the Galapagos.

I was excited at the prospect of being a student again and also learning how to run an International mountaineering expedition.

Having spent a month traveling through Ecuador, I felt I was coming to the course with a strong knowledge of Ecuadorian customs and a grasp of the language. When I met the Instructors, I quickly learned that they had limited international experience and didn't speak any Spanish. No group members spoke the language and they seemed disinterested in learning anything about Ecuadorian culture.

As we traveled through we traveled through Andean cities on our way to different mountains, I became the translator, for a group that continually had cultural conflicts. This caused difficulties and required many discussions with the group to try to reach some sort of understanding.



The villages we stopped at were situated on extraordinarily steep mountain sides with lush green farmland rising up on all sides, until you reached an altitude where ice and rock took over. These remote mountain villages have yet be exploited because the steep dirt roads are too dangerous to support large scale commercial use.

On the course I learned the basics - avalanche safety, rope travel and crevasse rescue. On summit days we'd leave camp at 11pm and climb continuously until we reached the top of the mountain 8-10 hours later, just in time to see the sun rise. The views from the top and the lack of oxygen were unforgettable. After a quick picture we would hustle back down the mountain as fast and safely as possible to avoid rock fall/avalanche as the day heated up.

Having had so many diverse experiences during my time in Ecuador, I continue to reflect what I've learned as an observer of such a different and unique culture. I enjoyed my brief stint as a mountaineer and plan to continue climbing next winter, but when I look back on my mountaineering experience in light of my cultural experience, I cant help but think of a quote I read in a book recently:

"It's the sides of mountains which sustains life, not the top. That's where things grow."  
*(Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance).*

