

Our J2A pilgrimage to Ecuador took us to many strange, new and wonderful places. Along the way we observed many examples of what I would consider deep spirituality.

Architecture

Our walk through Old Quito gave us the opportunity to see exquisite examples of colonial era churches and other religious architecture.

Some of the more obvious examples would include the statue of the Virgin Mary atop the El Panecillo hill overlooking the city.

The children's choir performing a compellingly dissonant mixture of folkloric and more classical styles of choral music in a Sunday service at the Basilica Del Voto Nacional.

The ornate and beautiful Church of La Compañía de Jesús, resplendent with almost obscene quantities of gold leaf that dazzles the visitor.

Venturing further afield from the city, the former monastery adjacent to the magical Hacienda Cusin that we stayed at near the Otavalo Market.

Landscape

We also had the benefit of experiencing many unusual and exotic environments during our pilgrimage.

Riding through the Andes mountains in our tour bus with stop-offs at the occasional breathtaking scenic overlook.

Traipsing through the Amazon rainforest at night while listening to unidentifiable and vaguely dangerous sounding chirping noises, with nothing more than a weak flashlight and a non-English speaking local acting as our tour guide to help us chart our course.

Traveling in cable cars to ascend 3,500 feet up the slopes of the active Pichincha volcano to an elevation of more than 13,000 feet with the reward of a stunningly panoramic view of Quito at the top of the ride.

Define spirituality

How does one recognize spirituality? It can be a tricky thing to identify authentic spirituality, and there's not a consensus definition agreed to by all. However the apostle Paul tells us in his well-known passage from the Epistle to the Galatians that when one lives by the life of the spirit, the fruit of the spirit consists of things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. By this definition I would submit that our pilgrimage afforded us a wonderful opportunity to witness authentic spirituality in rare and special places.

Examples

The beautiful young woman who joined us for a brief ride in our tour bus while singing a traditional song in the native Quichua tongue.

The native woman in the Peguche community demonstrating her accomplished weaving skills, including the loom and more primitive pre-Colombian techniques, that she has faithfully practiced and refined for years while creating magnificent textiles.

Another woman in the same community showing us the crafting of bamboo flute instruments that are used in what is one of Ecuador's most renowned indigenous family musical groups.

The delicious home-cooked meal that we enjoyed while visiting the Magdalena community, lovingly prepared by one of its matriarchs and served by her shy but wide-eyed daughter.

The joyful and innocent laughter of the children of the Santa Barbara indigenous community that we visited by canoeing down the Rio Arajuno while in the Amazon, who performed traditional costumed dances before inviting us to join them in the merrymaking.

Summary

Certainly we didn't lack for ample interaction with locals outside of the indigenous communities we visited. But what for me will likely become the most lasting impression of the pilgrimage was experiencing these native peoples who, though sharing little with us culturally and even less linguistically, quietly embodied the joy, peace, and goodness that we can recognize as true spirituality.