

Title:

Under The Volcano

Word Count:

686

Summary:

We were under the volcano, in the town of Baños, Ecuador. On the days agenda? Watch it erupt, have lunch for a dollar, hike to waterfalls and dance all night.

Keywords:

under the volcano, ecuador, baños ecuador

Article Body:

The town sits at the base or "under the volcano" named Tungurahua. We wanted to see it erupt, so we paid the \$3 each for a two-hour trip to a hill overlooking the town. The top of the volcano was visible from there, and sure enough, it coughed up a bit of lava on cue. I had another rum drink and helped to push-start the vehicle that brought us there.

My wife Ana and I spent a week there in Baños, Ecuador, in June of 2004. The hotel, with cable TV, cost \$6 per night. The usual rate was \$12, but we're good negotiators. Lunch was just \$1 each day, or \$2.25 total for both, with tip. Typically, it was chicken, rice, beans, salad and juice. Every other day we splurged and paid \$1.50 at a nicer place.

<b>Hot Springs Of Baños</b>

The town really is right under the volcano, which has caused problems for the residents over the years. The upside is that it also causes an abundance of hot water. Baños has two hot spring facilities, and two with cold water. They are some of the best mineral springs in Ecuador.

The most popular is at the base of a waterfall that tumbles from the mountain above. It is a short walk from anywhere in town, and it costs just a dollar, or a little more if you want to enjoy the mineral-rich waters under the stars each evening. There is a sign that documents the various minerals found in the water, and many come to alleviate their arthritis or other illnesses.

A trip to one of the hot springs became a daily ritual. Afternoons Ana shopped. I played chess in the open market in the center of town, with Manolo or Rene, or

other locals. At all times, we enjoyed the scenery. Just look up and you see lush hills and classic colonial architecture all around.

Evenings are for dancing. Santo Pecado ("saint/sinner") was usually our first stop. The owner was always ready to trade stories. Tuparina was our favorite disco, perhaps due to the huayusa, a drink made of a psychadelic plant collected by the family of the owner.

### <b>Under The Volcano Tungurahua</b>

Several of the dozens of volcanos in Ecuador are active. Tungurahua, which overlooks Banos, is one of the most active. You need to get out of town to see it, because Baños is set deep in the surrounding lush, green mountains, which block the view. A great way to get a good look is on a "volcano tour."

Several operations in Banos take you on tours to see an eruption. Just flag down one of the "chivas" circling town and blasting loud music in the evening. A chiva is an open-sided bus of sorts, with seating inside or on the roof.

Ana rode inside, and I had to try the roof. My advice? Watch out for branches! We toured the city with party music playing the whole time, then headed into the mountains. There were fire-juggling entertainers on top of the hill, and free hot rum drinks. We looked down on the lights of Banos, and even saw Tungurahua spit up some lava. A two-hour experience, drinks and the honor of helping push-start the chiva. Not bad for \$3 each.

### <b>Other Activities in Banos</b>

There is a great zoo (bears, birds, tortoises and more). You can rent an ATV, bicycle to nearby waterfalls or tunnels, party in dozens of bars, buy avocados for 20 cents, see a recent movie in your own private viewing room for \$1.50 per person (bring all the food and drinks you want) - and almost everything is within a few blocks of any hotel. Banos is beautiful, with a perfect climate year-round.

The real name of the town is Baños de Agua Santa, but it is usually just called Baños. It is in the Andes Mountains, at the foot of the volcano Tungurahua, in Ecuador, South America. Any of the busses from Quito, eighty miles to the north, will cost you less than five dollars. Ready for a vacation under the volcano?