

GUAYAQUIL, ECUADOR

The Van Gogh has already docked near Guayaquil by the time we surface for breakfast at 8 am. We have chosen to travel into the city by organised shuttle bus, where we will visit a newly developed waterfront area. We have memories of our last trip to Ecuador, and feel that we need to stay with fellow passengers this time, for safety reasons.

2 $\frac{1}{2}$ million people live in the city of Guayaquil, which stands on the river Guayas, 12 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean. The trip by air conditioned shuttle bus shows us the dock area, suburbs, and finally the centre of this large city. In the suburbs, we see buildings made of brick or concrete blocks, cement rendered on the front, and painted in bright colours. There are fancy wrought iron grilles over the windows, and balconies with stone pillars.

Today is a Sunday, so we do not know if any shops will be open. When we near the city centre though, we see many shops and colourful market stalls selling their wares. There seem to be thousands of people out on the streets, all doing their Christmas shopping. The city centre is dominated by modern skyscrapers, which sit alongside some impressive old Colonial buildings with their many pillars and carved stone facades.

The traffic seems to move quite quickly, with very little queuing, and we wonder whether this will be the case on weekdays. The vehicles on the roads are a mixture of yellow taxis, old Ladas and Chevrolets, Chinese buses and 1960's Lorries. A number of these vehicles have cracked windscreens, bald tyres and other MOT failure defects.

Finally, after about 40 minutes travelling across the city, the shuttle bus drops us all off at one end of the Malecon Waterfront. This area was developed in 2000, and is a very pleasant place to stroll. There are lots of people here, both tourists and local families, and we feel safe wandering around on our own.

The Malecon has a 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ Km long paved promenade with tropical gardens, statues, modern sculptures, water features, children's' play areas, outside stages, model boats, and quad bikes. There are also shopping malls, cafes, bars and restaurants and an IMAX theatre. Queues of excited children are waiting to see Father Christmas in one of the malls. Workers in pale blue or orange

overalls are busy sweeping up litter and leaves from the paved areas around the malls, and the whole city appears clean and tidy.



Towards the furthest end of the Malecon area we can see the old part of Guayaquil clinging to the hillside. This is the infamous Barrio Las Penas - an area of ill repute we have been warned about! At this point, we turn around and retrace our steps towards the bus pick-up point. As we near the bus stop, we can hear the street sellers selling their ice creams

and bottled water. The cries of "agua, agua, agua, agua, agua agua, seem to follow us as we are driven back through the city towards the Van Gogh

We are so pleased that we have visited this part of Ecuador, instead of Manta. We felt perfectly safe walking around here on our own, we were not hassled by dubious street sellers, and the city appeared clean. No one pressurised us to buy anything in the souvenir shops, and the people were polite and friendly. We would certainly like to return to this part of Ecuador one day.