

Christmas in Cuenca

I'd like to share our view of the holiday season here in Cuenca. It actually kicks off with the first weekend in November, although many stores start selling Christmas decorations around the end September and definitely in October.

The first weekend in November coincides with Halloween (a new celebration here), the Día de Difuntos or Day of the Dead, on November 2nd, and Tres de Noviembre on the 3rd. It is a 3 to 4-day long weekend and many people from the coast travel up to the sierra (the inter-Andean valley) as similar numbers travel from the sierra to the coast.

The Day of the Dead is celebrated by visiting family cemetery sites. In the larger cities, the government often provides various bands throughout the day and the visitors bring food and beverages as well as flowers to their departed loved ones. Children are always included. Among the special treats are guaguas de pan (bread babies) and a thick purple drink called colada morada. The guaguas (a kichwa word) are decorated and symbolize the new generation and the beverage symbolizes the past generation. It is not a sad day, but a day of joy in the connection of the generations. People picnic, play games and celebrate the life of the departed ones.

Tres de Noviembre is the celebration of the city of Cuenca's independence from Spain. This year Cuenca is celebrating its 200th anniversary. Mind you, the independence only lasted a couple of months before the Spanish retook the city, but it was a beginning. The 9th of October is the Independence Day of Guayaquil. There are other independence days in other major cities and then came the formation of Ecuador. Tres de Noviembre is such a big holiday because it combines other holidays with Independence Day. Traditionally, there is a huge crafts fair along the Tomebamba River. It probably runs for at least ½ mile along either side of the river. Aside from artisans from many different countries (including a few from Europe and Asia) there is a nice selection of food stalls and wagons to choose from. There is also live entertainment. The fair spreads to other areas of the historic city center.

This year the celebrations are quite different. For the Day of the Dead people were only allowed to visit the cemetery in small groups and the city determined the capacity of the cemetery and allowed only 30% in. Also, visitors were only permitted to stay for 20 or 30 minutes. Usually the visits are large family groups and full day celebrations. Also, temperatures were taken before entry, masks were necessary and social distancing by groups was enforced. Because of the attendance restrictions, it was necessary to register with the city for a time slot a week or so ahead.

The huge crafts fair was cancelled for Tres de Noviembre and any indoor or outdoor entertainments were restricted in size. I know the city was planning special things for the 200th holiday, but all the major entertainments were cancelled. Plays and concerts were limited in

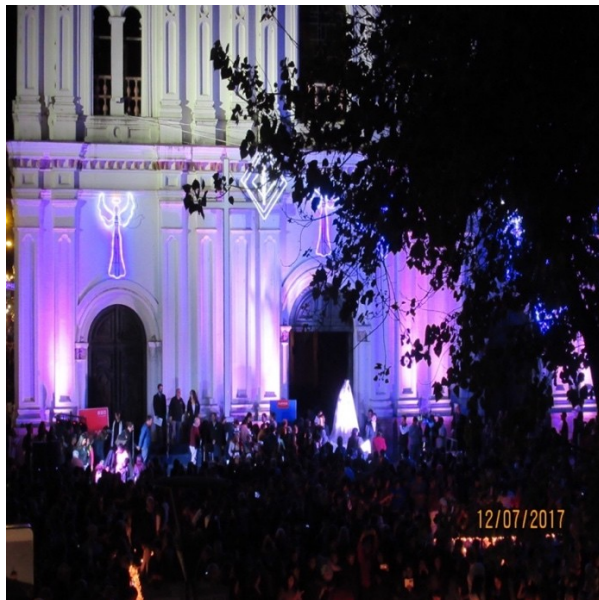
size and the city has attempted to set up small tours into the smaller surrounding towns. Cuenca still seems to have had an influx of Ecuadorian tourists up for the weekend.

As I said, Christmas decorations start to show up in the stores in October. This year, on November 6th, we were shopping in the big supermarket and they were playing Christmas songs (not carols) from the US. On the 9th one of the apartments in the building across the street put up and lit their Christmas tree. It's getting closer!

Of course, there are always city Christmas lights. The number of displays depends on the budget for the year and some of the displays move from place to place in the city. The following are pictures of the lights in the city, a couple of displays and the display along the Tomebamba River.



The first of the big Christmas celebrations takes place at the plazaleta in front of Santo Domingo. It is called the adoration of the Virgen Morenica de Rosario. It is held the first week in December and encompasses the entire intersection in front of the church as well the two streets. There are thousands of candle-lit luminarias set in patterns. I think it's possible that there are as many luminarias as there are people attending. We were lucky that we know people who lived across the street from the church and were able to view the celebration from the 2nd floor. One year we "saw" it from the street and really it was impossible to see any of it. The Virgen is brought out to be viewed on the street after a Mass in the church. There is music and snacks and sooooo many people. Here are a few pictures of the event.



After this celebration, there are many local church events, many novenas and local parades organized by various church communities. Most churches and local “social clubs” plan to have an entry in the big Christmas Eve parade. These are photos of a local parade taken from our apartment.





The big parade is called the Paseo del Niño and is in honor of a statue of the Christ Child that was given to the Cuenca Diocese that the monseigneur took with him on a trip to the Holy Land and then to Rome where it was blessed by the Pope. For the past 60 years this parade has been held, but not this year. It draws between 100,000 and 150,000 people. Some are participants, some are just observers. The Christ Child has several different robes and the honor of carrying the Child from San Sebastian Plaza into the New Cathedral (a distance of 6 blocks) is bestowed on a different group of people each year. This year the parade will not be held because of Covid-19. Picture the density of the observers crowded onto sidewalks maybe 4' wide for 6 blocks. Instead the diocese has decided to take the Niño through the various parishes in the city using the "Pope mobile" from Pope Francis' 2015 visit to Ecuador. They have also arranged with the army to helicopter the Niño over the entire city. The parade takes 8 or more hours to pass assuming one stays in one place and can stand for that long. There are vendors of little toys and snacks as well as one family that has been making chicha, an alcoholic drink, that is passed out for free. Most viewers don't stay for the whole parade. They shop in the stores that line the street and watch off and on, or they wander off to get something to eat like ice cream or a cold drink. Remember it is summer here for Christmas and if sunny, it is very warm. The lineup of participants is probably more than a mile long. There are floats, decorated cars and pick-up trucks, groups of walkers (many of whom perform traditional dances for the viewers), adults and children on horseback in traditional Indigenous or Spanish costume. It is just as long as the Macy's Thanksgiving parade and far more culturally varied. The day ends with the Rooster Mass or midnight mass.

The following photos are of the parade from other years.



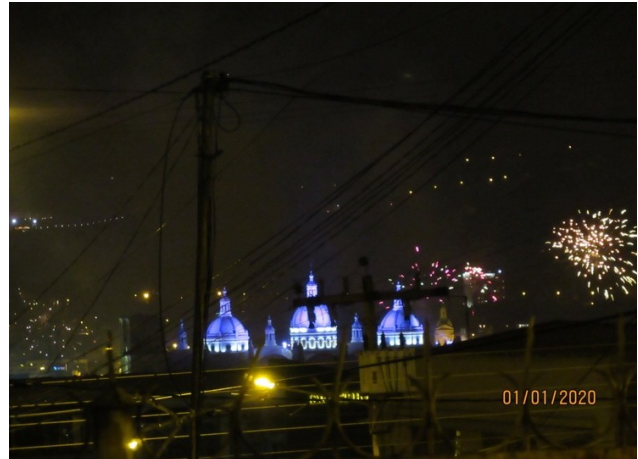


While the parade is going on, there are those who are preparing the Christmas Eve dinner. This is very family oriented and aside from eating, this is when presents are exchanged. Dinner is served, if it is early, at 10PM, but can be anywhere from that time to after midnight. We've been blessed to be invited to 2 Christmas Eve dinners. The first was at the home of the grandmother-in-law of our lawyer. It was a huge affair with many aunts and uncles, cousins and other family members and more food that I've ever seen. They are Spanish descent on both sides of the family. The second dinner was with the family of a former colleague of Gary's and his family. They are probably Mestizo, a mixture of Spanish and Indigenous. This was just a gathering of parents and their children and their immediate families – and us. It was much less formal, much more homey.

Usually Christmas Day is a quiet one. It is a day of attending Mass and possibly with a small gathering of immediate family for dinner.

There is a lull during Christmas and New Year's Eve. On New Year's Eve there are parties or family gatherings, but from about 10:30pm to 1:30am there are fireworks everywhere. These are displayed by families, partygoers, various organizations, restaurants, hotels—just everyone. It's truly amazing since fireworks are legal here for all. The dogs don't appreciate it very much. There are also "globos" or lanterns released into the sky and the burning of manigotes in the streets. Manigotes are dummies many times with political faces attached. There is a custom of jumping over the manigote, but one never knows if there are fireworks in them. More than one person is seriously burned on New Year's Eve especially considering the area exposed to the flames or fireworks.

These photos are from New Year's Eve last year. You can see a burning manigote and fireworks over the Cathedral. Please excuse the telephone poles and wiring cutting through the photo.



The Christmas season ends on Three Kings Day with another big parade (which has also been cancelled for this year) in a different area of the city. This one tends to make fun of political figures. We've only seen photos and videos of this one. It is on the other side of the city and we've usually been packing to travel to one of Gary's advising assignments. There are prizes awarded for best of several categories.

And then the events move into pre-Lent activities, but that is another story.