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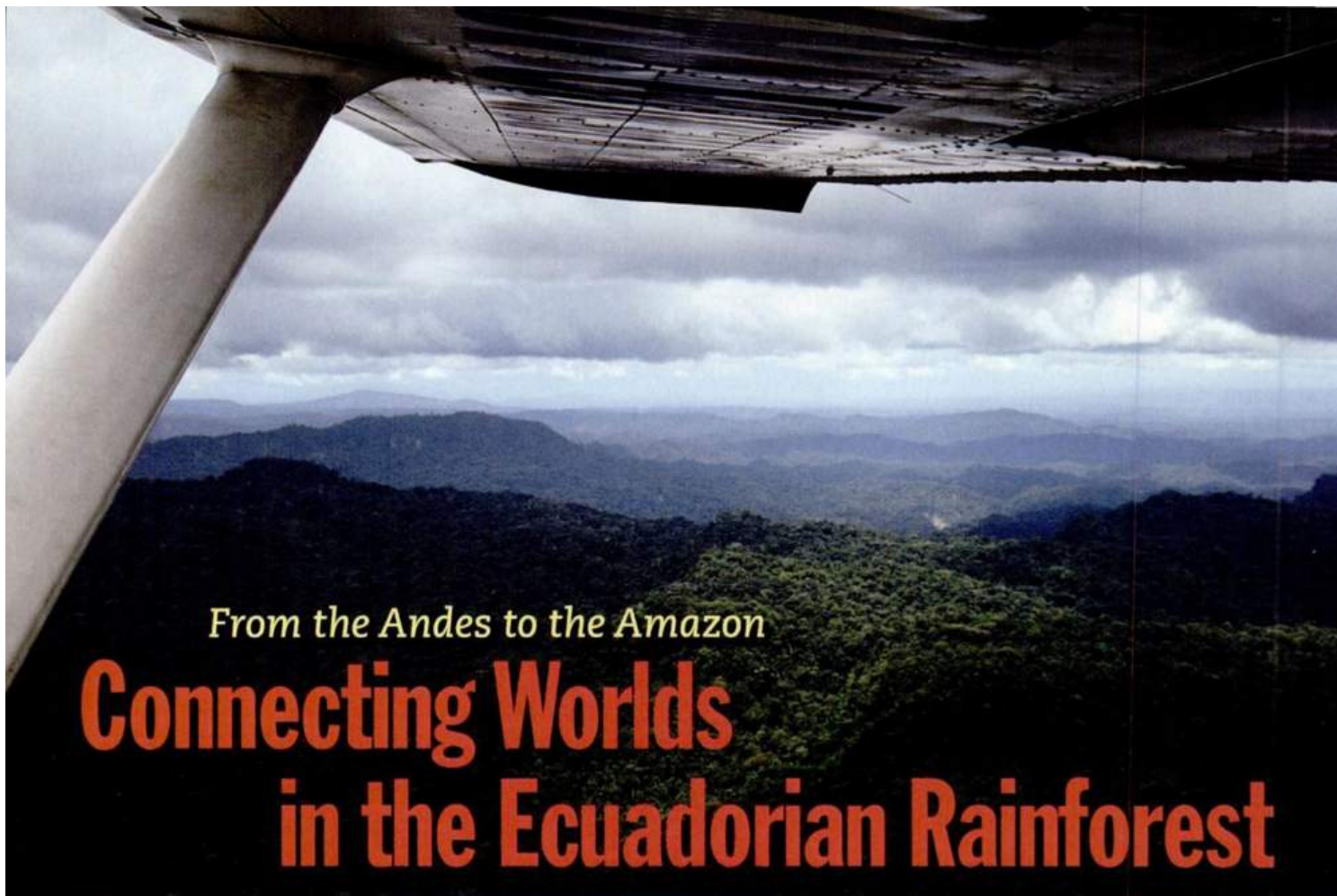
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*From the Andes to the Amazon*

# Connecting Worlds in the Ecuadorian Rainforest

**STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY BY LANE WALLACE**

IMAGINE, IF YOU WILL, THE LANDSCAPE OF THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST—PLATEAUS AND MESAS falling away into broad valleys before rising again in sloping ridgelines and abrupt cliff faces that give the scene a distinctly three-dimensional feel and power. Now imagine that landscape coated

in a thick, Berber carpet of green, broccoli-top trees and ferns at least 100 feet tall. And imagine all that foliage so densely packed together that the ground itself is indistinguishable except for a few glimpses of cascading waterfalls and winding, muddy rivers that offer the only contrast in an otherwise unbroken sea of rumpled, green terrain.

Imagine looking down on all of this—with almost no sign of human settlement, development or presence, as far as the eye can see—and you will have an idea what it is to fly over the vast stretches of the Ecuadorian rainforest.

The Republic of Ecuador, named for its location on the Equator, is one of the smallest countries in South America, containing roughly the same area as the state of Colorado. And yet it possesses one of the most diverse geological landscapes imaginable—from the tropical seacoast, to the volcanic highlands of the Andes Mountains, to the sweeping, dense rainforest of the upper Amazon basin. Its population also includes one of the highest percentages of indigenous people in all of Latin America.

The diversity of Ecuador presents unique challenges for anyone living there, even as it creates an extraordinarily rich tapestry of culture and environment. In the capital city of Quito, whose 9,300-foot elevation makes it the second-highest capital in the world, the temperatures cover such a range that it's possible to

experience all four seasons in a single day. And while Ecuador's mountainous landscape and dense vegetation offer stunning vistas and a vast array of valuable natural resources, those same elements also make ground transportation somewhat problematic.

As the crow flies, for example, it's only 150 miles from Quito, in the highlands, to the port city of Manta, where many tours to Ecuador's famed Galapagos Islands depart. But the one road between the two cities twists and turns along steep mountain slopes, and earthquakes, landslides or floods can close sections without notice. By car, the trip can take 8 hours—which might explain the rising popularity of AeroGal's domestic airline service between the two cities. I climbed onto one of AeroGal's 737s in Quito at 6:45 a.m. one morning and was on the ground in Manta by 7:20. In Ecuador, flying is definitely the way to go.

And yet, private airplanes are somewhat rare in Ecuador. I asked a member of the Civil Aeronautics Board how many general aviation pilots and airplanes there were in the country, and he gave me a faxed list of all the private airplane owners—by name. The list was only a page and a half long. The scarcity of small private airplanes and GA pilots seems to be a product of both an extraordinarily challenging flight environment, with high altitude airports and hazardous terrain, and also pure economic reality. In 2001, the World Bank estimated that no less

than 45 percent of Ecuador's population was living in poverty, earning less than \$1 a day. The percentage of people who could afford the luxury of small airplane flying here is relatively small.

But that same combination of poverty and natural obstacles to transportation is also the reason I'm here in Ecuador. I was invited here by a St. Louis-based nonprofit organization called Wings of Hope to see the difference a few small airplanes can make in the lives of extremely poor indigenous people living in the depths of Ecuador's dense and inaccessible rainforest.

Wings of Hope is a completely secular organization that was founded by four St. Louis businessmen in 1962 after hearing a lecture about a pilot/nurse in Africa whose Piper Cub had been destroyed by animals chewing on the fabric. The original objective was to raise enough money to send her a single metal airplane. But one plane led to another, the organization grew, and eventually volunteer pilots began to accompany the airplanes on their humanitarian missions. Today, Wings of Hope has over 300 volunteers in St. Louis who restore and refurbish donated airplanes, and a total of 151 aircraft operating in 40 countries around the world.

Wings of Hope supports six airplanes in the Pastaza province of Ecuador—a Cessna 172, three 182s and two 206s. The planes are based in the town of Shell (named for the oil company), which sits in the shadow of the Andes at the western edge of the rainforest. Five minutes after lifting off from Shell, virtually all signs of civilization disappear. But the rainforest does have inhabitants, even if they leave little mark upon the land. Tucked beneath the jungle's dense canopy are hundreds of small villages populated by indigenous Quichua, Huaroni, Achuar and Shuar people. The villages differ in many ways; from size and condition to the amount of contact or influence they've had from the "outside" world. But they all have two things in common: Their locations are all very remote, and their residents are all very poor.

Those living in the jungle survive on a diet of fruit, plantains and yucca root, supplemented with a wide variety of fish, birds and wildlife they still hunt with traditional blowgun darts and spears. But shelter is basic, sanitation is challenging, food is not always plentiful or balanced, and the environment is rife with hazards that can be deadly for people with little access to modern medicine or medical facilities. If an 8-hour drive to Manta sounds daunting, consider that the same 150 miles in the rainforest could take a villager 3-4 weeks to cover by foot—which, except for a few places that can be reached by dugout canoe, is the only transportation option.

In this kind of environment, access to an airplane can make a breathtaking difference in the possibilities and quality of life. But the jungle is a place where everything grows and looms large—including the challenges inherent in operating an airplane. Missionaries began building dirt or grass runways in the Ecuadorian rainforest many years ago, and there are now 100 different airstrips serviced by the six planes supported by Wings of Hope. But the condition of those airstrips varies, and most of them aren't destinations for the faint of heart—not to mention anyone unschooled in bush flying or short-field operations.

Two years ago, Ecuador's DAC (their equivalent of the FAA) decreed that any new strips had to be at least 500 meters (1,500 feet) in length. But some of the earlier ones are a scant 250 (750 feet) or 300 meters (900 feet) long, located at elevations of 1,000 to 2,000 feet, and surrounded by some very serious 100-foot obstacles. Landing short or long would have catastrophic consequences, as would an engine failure in flight. If you went



■ Lane and Fundacion Aero Amazonicas pilot Homero Alvarez with a Wings of Hope Cessna 182 at a jungle strip, deep in the Ecuadorian rainforest (top). A thatched bamboo hut in the village of Inidichuris where Lane spent a night (second from top). The strip at Tarangaro, surrounded by hills and dense jungle growth (above). A girl and her younger sister meet a Wings of Hope plane in the thriving village of Loquino (left).



■ Aviation is the best travel option in Ecuador, where the sharp mountainsides and steep ravines of the Andes (left) and dense jungle landscape make ground travel slow, difficult and subject to a multitude of blockages and delays.

improve the individual communities' ability to better feed and clothe and help themselves. Even maintaining and operating the airplanes is eventually supposed to become the sole responsibility of the local communities they serve.

For the moment, however, Wings of Hope subsidizes the airplanes—which act as cargo trucks, passenger buses, jungle ambulances and carrier pigeons all rolled up into one. On my first trip with Homero, we load a Huaroni family and some supplies into the back of the airplane and fly to a small strip tucked deep in a valley. One thing about flying over such densely forested jungle—it sure makes airstrips easy to spot.

We descend toward the strip, tall star-shaped fern trees rushing by just beneath the wheels. Close up, the rainforest canopy looks like an intense fireworks finale in dense shades and layers of green, with starbursts dusted in floral arrangements of pink, yellow and red. We touch down on a rough and uneven landing strip where a small crowd of villagers has gathered to meet us. The family and supplies are quickly unloaded, a couple of sacks heading back to Shell from the village are strapped into the back, and we take off again, climbing steeply as the treetops skim past beneath us.

We do a quick turn at Shell, refueling and loading sacks of pig food destined for a village that has fledgling pig, chicken and tilapia fish farming projects underway. The pungent smell of fertilizer accompanies us as we take off into decidedly uncertain skies. Almost all of my flights in the jungle are in similar conditions—and I am soon fully versed in exactly where this particular 182 leaks. For it, like any bush plane, is essentially a flying pick-up truck—structurally and mechanically sound, but short on niceties or comfort. And after a few landings in the jungle, it's a pretty mud-splashed truck, as well.

We land at the village of Loquino, unload, and take on two men from the group of villagers who meet our flight. As Homero revs the 182's engine before take-off, I notice both men crossing themselves fervently in the back seat. I smile. Nothing like a firm vote of confidence from your passengers.

Each location we fly to differs in its particulars, but they are all incredibly lush. The rainforest is not only a place where life exists on a more primitive and natural level. It's also an incubator pulsing with an almost palpable life force, where the air itself smells alive and where vegetation seems to grow before your very eyes. At a strip called Tarangaro, I step out of the plane into thick, tropical heat and three-foot-tall grass, disturbing a cloud of flying insects that rise up in startled disarray around me. I start to swat at them before I realize I'm surrounded not by mosquitoes, but by butterflies.

The villages themselves also differ. Some have neatly brushed dirt paths and immaculate thatched huts. Others are more ragtag, with skinny dogs, chickens and even the occasional monkey wandering around ramshackle plank structures that serve as houses for numerous families. Some have neat school buildings and a medical clinic, while others have only minimal structures that blend into their surroundings. But all of them clearly exist in a world separated from Shell by far more than miles.

For five days, we wait out downpours, dodge clouds, and fly in and out of any number of jungle airstrips. We pick up people,

down in an airplane here, they'd most likely never even find the wreckage. Which makes a good maintenance program especially important, even though knowledgeable and skilled GA mechanics are hard to find in southeastern Ecuador.

Then, of course, there's the weather. Turns out there's a *reason* they call it a rainforest. The rainy season supposedly hadn't started yet when I was there, but it still rained every single day. Not *all* day, but at any given moment, it was raining somewhere. Wings of Hope has installed solar-powered HF radio equipment at the airstrips it supports and trained at least one person at each location in how to evaluate the weather and operate the equipment. The system is sketchy, but by calling around to enough villages in any given area, we could usually get at least a rough idea of local weather conditions, although those change quickly in the jungle.

The two pilots I flew with, Carlos Godoy and Homero Alvarez, operate Cessna 182s for Fundacion Aero Amazonicas, the local foundation through which Wings of Hope channels its support in Ecuador. The other four airplanes donated and supported by Wings of Hope are owned and operated by Achuar and Shuar tribal organizations. Godoy is the president of Fundacion Aero Amazonicas. He learned to fly in the United States but then returned to Ecuador in the hopes of using his flying skills to assist indigenous communities in his native country. It was Godoy who convinced Wings of Hope to set up a base in Ecuador, and he remains fervently devoted to the effort.

"I saw years ago how hard it was for the indigenous to survive here," he says. "And I said, we have to change that."

Easier said than done, of course. Change is a complex process, especially when the idea is not just to give away supplies, but to

drop off supplies, perform emergency medical evacuations, carry groceries from the town out to the villages and carry produce from the villages back into town. None of it has a large-scale impact, of course. One ... or even six ... small Cessnas can only carry or do so much. In addition to the physical demands of operating the aircraft, Godoy has to constantly balance schedules, priorities, loads, fees charged and services rendered among a diverse population whose needs he cannot ever really fulfill. I don't envy him the task.

Ten or 15 years from now, Godoy says, the airplanes may not be necessary. There is oil in the rainforest, and there are already oil rigs drilling in isolated locations we flew over. The oil companies bring revenue to Ecuador—and to the indigenous villages—but they also may bring an end to the way of life the villagers now know.

"If they find oil here," Godoy says, "they'll build roads. And if roads get built, civilization will come to these people whether they want it or not. And even if they want it, they will lose the old ways."

Whether or not that evolution would represent tragedy, progress, or some layered and complex mix of the two, is a question that perhaps has no easy or even right answer. But for the moment, a group of volunteers in St. Louis and Ecuador, with the help of a few refurbished Cessnas, are allowing a small number of traditional indigenous communities in the rainforest to keep one foot in both worlds—maintaining the traditions and basic lifestyle of their ancestors, while reaping at least some benefits of the modern world. ✈

*For more information, visit [wings-of-hope.org](http://wings-of-hope.org).*

■ **Flying over the dense, misty treetops of the Ecuadorian rainforest is an exercise in engine and mechanical trust (top). One of a number of isolated oil rigs currently operating in the rainforest (middle). If plentiful oil is found, the indigenous people's way of life, like in this remote village of Nuevo Corrientes (right), may come to an end. One of many beautiful, old volcanic craters high in the Andes, near Quito, Ecuador (below).**

