

ECUADOR NEWS - TOURISM

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Ahead of the Rest

The final installment in our three-part series on accessible tourism

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Margaret Morrison and Isabel Robinson, both in their 60s, have traveled around the globe. Margaret has been to more than a dozen countries in as many years and Isabel travels internationally as often possible; she will be going to Spain in June and to Poland in September.

One might assume they are a couple of fortunate retirees enjoying their golden years galavanting about the globe. All of that is basically true, but their galavanting is done on two wheels.

Margaret has neuro-sarcoidosis, an inflammation of the central nervous system, and Isabel was left disabled more than 40 years ago from cerebral tuberculosis and meningitis. Though both women require the use of a wheelchair, they travel to more places than most able-bodied people. "My life is for living, not for sitting indoors," Margaret says.

She and Isabel recently toured Ecuador thanks to two, forward-thinking tour agencies - Ecuador For All and Wings on Wheels - which specialize in accessible tourism, or tourism for disabled persons.

Jean Burdett founded Wings on Wheels in Great Britain 13 years ago, which has helped hundreds of disabled persons travel around the globe. Distant and exotic destinations are her target when planning trips for her clients. "I am trying to bring them to places they want to go but need help."

Ecuador For All, owned and operated by Juan and Pablo Marañon, is the only receiving tour agency for groups of disabled travelers in Ecuador. They recognize that tourists with disabilities comprise perhaps the largest, untapped market for visitors to the Latin American region.

"Nobody is specialized in this," says Juan. "There are agencies and operators that are prepared to handle one person, but not a group." How does he manage the logistics to bring groups of disabled travelers to Ecuador?

HOW THEY DO IT

Pablo, Juan's brother, owns Huasquila Lodge, the only known wheelchair accessible lodge in the Amazon Jungle. Huasquila is 180km southeast of Quito near the town of Archidona. They have seven cabins which meet international standards for accessibility and all are connected to the dining and swimming area via a network of pathways and



HUASQUILA LODGE The only known wheelchair accessible lodge in the Amazon jungle takes disabled tourists into the rain forest. Right: Huasquila's accessible hot tub.



Photos: Lance Brashear / Ecuador For All

ramps. Additionally, a lift is installed to help with transfers to the pool or hot tub.

Huasquila, though, is not a rehabilitation center or refuge for the disabled. It is a full-on, jungle lodge open to all travelers, but because the Marañon brothers began thinking about accessibility early in the construction phase they were able to create a universal design which serves a greater segment of society than any other lodge in Ecuador, including persons with physical disabilities.

Though the experience of staying in an Amazon lodge is nothing short of amazing, tourists want to get out and see the jungle. Soft earth, uneven terrain, and thick vegetation make it a difficult trek even for an able-bodied person, let alone someone confined to a wheelchair.

The Marañon brothers, though, have come up with a simple and novel solution. They have custom fit half a dozen standard wheelchairs with a third wheel and added removable extension poles, creating rickshaws, which allow them to pull their clients through the jungle.

As Burdett watches the caravan bump along the path ahead of her, she stares in amazement. Though she has taken disabled tourists all over the world, she has never seen this level of commitment. "I've

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never heard of anyone who provides this kind of service. Considering that one has only been doing this for three years it's absolutely incredible that he has all this equipment and is able to get them here and do all of this."

To see it all happen is to have the backward-thinking reaction, why didn't someone do this sooner? It is a very simple and straight-forward service. But for someone to point out the obvious is to have it pointed right back at them. Burdett's reaction: "It's probably not much to him but to people like us it is a lot."

COMMITMENT

Though the jungle is perhaps the highlight of the trip, Ecuador For All takes groups and individuals throughout the country, including the sierra, the coast, and the Galapagos Islands, managing it all with unparalleled commitment.

Juan Marañon accompanies his disabled tourists 24/7. His dedication goes beyond everyone's expectations. Anyone who might doubt that should review the April, 2010 issue of PN Magazine, the monthly magazine for the Paralyzed Veterans of America. The cover story is by Bob Huskey, a paralyzed military veteran who toured Ecuador with round-the-clock service from Marañon.

When Huskey experienced an imbalance in electrolytes he was hospitalized for a day. "The doctors and staff were efficient and knew exactly how to treat my problem. Juan stayed with us and was our interpreter when needed."

And the publicity is invaluable. Ecuador For All is a

small operation with a small budget, but in the world of accessible tourism virtually all promotion is word of mouth. Besides PN Magazine, Ecuador For All and Huasquila Lodge have also been covered in MS Focus, the magazine for the Multiple Sclerosis Foundation.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

In the quest to serve the underserved, Juan Marañon stresses starting small and being

deliberate. "To create accessibility, first you have to understand exactly what kind of disabilities you are going to work with." Marañon is focused principally on people with physical disabilities - those who are confined to a wheelchair or have reduced mobility.

Another key to their success is what Juan calls "mini-circuits." He has created small tour routes that involve other operators along the way who are willing to accommodate the needs of his group. "In each region we have one or two circuits.

I do not offer all of Ecuador. For example, in Tena I have operators and restaurants and places to visit who are convinced to help us." Virtually no place is accessible, but some are more accessible than others and, more importantly, some are more willing to make adjustments than others.

Still, Marañon has to be a problem solver and seek practical solutions to provide accessibility, most of which are manual and temporary, but they work. He uses a bus with a ramp in the back, a hand-crank lift for the swimming pool, and a lot of sweat and muscle in the jungle. "You have to have an open mind and look for solutions."

CLEARING A PATH

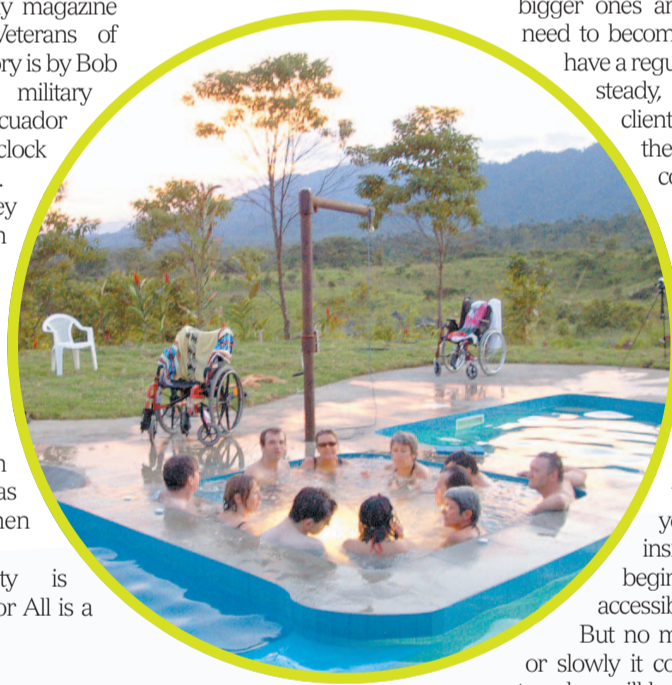
All of this translates to continual learning opportunities for Marañon, but not only from clients. "I learn more from operators and agencies outside Ecuador to know what they are looking for," he says. Ecuador For All is a member of SATH - Society for Accessible Travel and Hospitality and ENAT - European Network for Accessible Tourism, where they share experiences with other operators and agencies.

And Marañon relies principally on small operators. He says the bigger ones are skeptical of the need to become accessible. They have a regular business with a steady, able-bodied, clientele which makes them more difficult to convince.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons that change comes slowly. But Marañon says it does come eventually. He has seen changes since he first began four years ago and insists, "Those who begin to create accessibility."

But no matter how quickly or slowly it comes, the disabled travelers will be the first to tell you that they cannot wait for change. Rebecca James, a tourist with Wings on Wheels, talks about the frustrating, catch-22 in creating accessibility. "They won't do it if we don't come, but if we don't come they won't do it."

So they come and even a country as inaccessible as Ecuador will not stop them. Why? As Burdett watches her group plow through the rain forest she nonchalantly shrugs and quips, "They are used to having to make do."



Tourism Guide of Ecuador

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