



My Session: Ecuador

IN A COUNTRY THAT EVOKES THE AMAZON AND ANDES, THERE IS A NEW TREASURE: WIND AND WAVES. HOLA SANTA MARIANITA. **BY MICHAEL BEHAR**

➔ **It's heresy to** suggest traveling abroad for something *other* than kiting. But after a recent two-week trip to Ecuador, I don't regret my inland adventures. With my wife, Ashley, I rented a 4x4 jeep and set off on an ambitious road trip that led us through mist-shrouded cloud forests, past belching volcanoes and impenetrable jungle and into bustling cities where hipsters promenade alongside Quechua Indians. In a country the size of Nevada, the cultural, geographical and ecological diversity of Ecuador



is mind-boggling. With so much to see and do, this compact South American country is undoubtedly the best place in the world to get skunked. And because Ecuador sits smack on the equator — a region typically devoid of wind-spawning fronts — getting skunked is likely. That is, of course, unless you know the secret spot.

Finding its location entails a 30-minute flight from Quito, the capital, to Manta, a tuna-fishing mecca blessed with wide, empty beaches. Robert Bedoya, a 35-year-old former windsurfing champion from Colombia, and his Australian-born wife, Alice Wilson, 24, meet us at the airport. Bedoya pioneered kiting in Ecuador where, he says, wind blows steadily from May to December. But when we arrive, the Pacific Ocean is dishearteningly glassy.

Bedoya started kiting in Colombia in 2002. "I was running a windsurfing center

SESSION STATS

- 📍 **Conditions:** 18 to 20 knots
- 📍 **Kite:** 2010 Crossbow 13m
- 📍 **Board:** Ocean Rodeo Mako Freeride 140 X 40
- 📍 **Distance From Home:** 3,100 miles

when suddenly people started asking about kiting," he recalls. The plan was to teach kiting in Colombia, but with unreliable winds, Bedoya wanted a better place to set up shop. "I met a Colombian windsurfer who had been living in Ecuador, and he told me it was windy there," he says. So Bedoya headed south. After a three-month search, he landed in Manta. But there, too, the wind didn't cooperate. Then Bedoya stumbled on a tiny hamlet called Santa Marianita, wedged between chalky cliffs on a scrubby peninsula that juts into the Pacific Ocean.

To get to Santa Marianita from Manta, we follow an unmarked dirt road through a narrow canyon. We're less than a half-mile from the beach and there isn't enough wind to extinguish a match. Nevertheless, Bedoya is musing about what size kite he'll fly today. Then we round a hairpin turn and wisps of sand streak across the road; palms are swaying, and I can see the water — it's flecked with whitecaps.

The chilly Humboldt Current, which tracks along



The author catches a morning session. Right, from top: Rigging on Santa Marianita beach; breakfast at an Andean market.



the western coastline of South America, is usually too far offshore from Ecuador to create the fierce thermal wind that blesses Mancora, a popular kiting locale 175 miles south in Peru. But Santa Marianita pokes out just far enough to lick the Humboldt, creating a temperature disparity between land and sea that cranks up the wind every afternoon. Peculiar microclimates in Ecuador are legendary, but the conditions in Santa Marianita are utterly freakish: The Ecuadorian coast extends 1,300 miles and yet the only place that gets reliable wind is this 2-mile-long beach. No wonder it took Bedoya a year to find the place and why, in 2003, he

ECUADOR LOGISTICS

- 📍 **Getting There:** Delta, American and Continental all serve Quito with flights from their major hubs. From Quito, a one-way ticket to Manta on Tame, Aerogal or Icaro costs about \$60; bag restrictions are arbitrary but fees are cheap — a few bucks at most for extra pounds.
- 📍 **Where to Stay:** Bedoya and Wilson run Villa Kite (ecuadorkitesurf@gmail.com) in Manta, with free Wi-Fi, hot showers and a wood-fired outdoor barbecue. (Don't miss the morning fish market, where you'll find fresh

- catch for the grill.) More upscale is the three-star Howard Johnson's Plaza Hotel (hojo.com). For solitude, stay in Santa Marianita, where Bedoya rents cabanas.
- 📍 **Lessons:** Ecuador Kitesurf (ecuadorkitesurf.com), offers packages that include lessons, gear, meals, accommodations and Spanish lessons. Prices start at \$225. Humboldt Kites (humboldtkites.com) which has partnered with Paul Menta's Kite House, also offers lessons and equipment repair. Contact wpcalima@gmail.com.



opened the country's first kite school there.

I rig up a 13-meter kite and it's pushing 18 knots. Despite the Humboldt, the ocean isn't cold; I'm roasting in a shorty. Bedoya and Wilson strip down to board shorts and rashies, as do the friendly locals, a crew numbering a dozen or so who

show up nearly every afternoon to ride. We stay on the water until sunset, when the wind typically begins to taper off for the day.

The next morning it's sunny and hot — and that pumps up the thermal to 22 knots. Even better, the wind shifts west, which allows for a 15-mile downwinder to Manta. It's

September and humpback whales are migrating; they breach playfully a quarter-mile offshore. By early November, ocean swells will arrive, triggering a left break that wraps around a nearby shoal.

After three days, I'm getting into the groove: daily sessions punctuated with frosty pilsners and tangy

ceviche served at a beachside palapa. But the rest of Ecuador beckons, and for the first time on a kite trip I'm not despondent when packing up my gear. I know that soon we'll be trekking the flanks of Cotopaxi, a 19,347-foot-high, snow-clad volcano in the Andes — and while that's not kiting, it's a very close second.

PHOTOS (B): ASHLEY KISSINGER



Afternoon thermals keep the wind cranking in the kite zone. Above: Robert Bedoya, Ecuador's kiteboarding pioneer.