

# The HAT

magazine



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Issue 50

# The Panama Hat

Last year UNESCO declared that the art of weaving a Panama hat in Ecuador would be added to their list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Hopefully this will help to keep the skill and tradition alive...

The fibres of the Toquilla Palm (*Carludovica Palmata*) are one of the finest hatmaking materials known and were woven to make hats by the people of Ecuador long before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadores in the 16th century. In Europe, hats woven from the palm were known as Panama hats because, before the construction of the Panama Canal, this is where they were shipped from. Once christened the hat name never changed, but Ecuador is their birthplace and the beginning of our story...

## PANAMA HATS

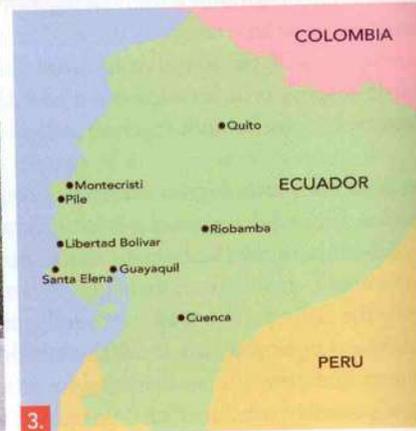
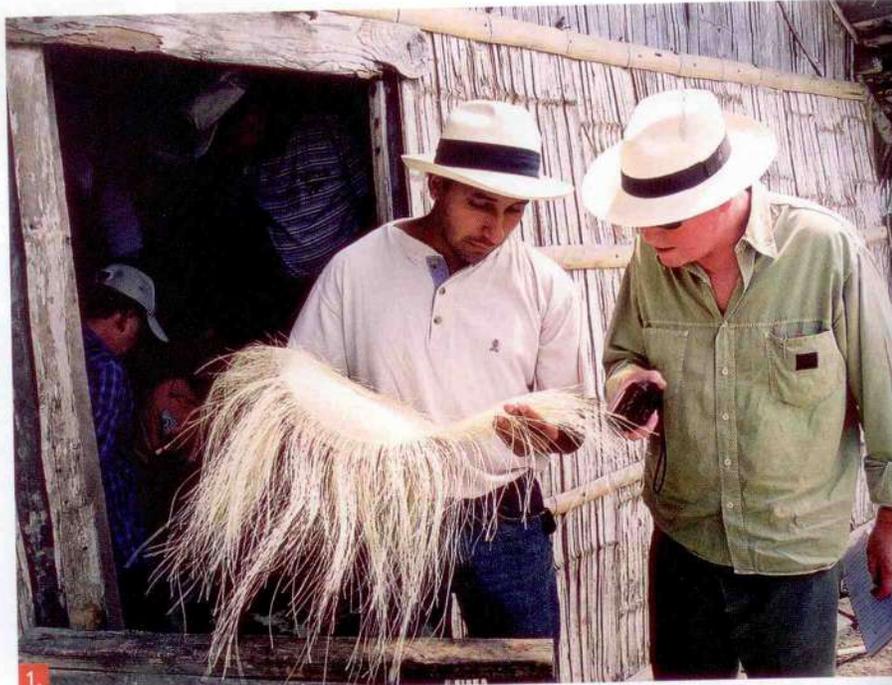
The natural colour of the straw is from a light ecru to cream. The best quality is very fine and light in colour, the weave almost indistinguishable and with a creamy smooth texture. The straw is usually woven in either a Montecristi or Brisa weave, the Montecristi is woven with two strands at a time and the Brisa with one strand. The difference in the weaves is similar to that between sisal and parisial. There are also fancy weaves used for the crown which can give an open, almost lace like effect. There is also a renaissance of crocheting Panama hats. All genuine Panamas have one thing in common, which is that they are only woven using straw from the Toquilla palm.

## THE PALM

The Toquilla Palm grows in several places in South America, but it is only in the western coastal region of Ecuador, in Manabi province, that its fibres are long enough for weaving. Ecuador is such a fertile country that the plantation owners grow this crop only where other cash crops will not grow, or where it is not economical to cultivate. Hence the palm is found in very inaccessible, hilly areas and can be transported to the villages only by donkey or horse. (When we visited we had to leave our 4-wheel drive vehicle and walk the last half mile to the plantation!)

The toquilla cutters pay the landowners for the rights to harvest the crop and then they transport it to villages, where it is converted into straw, often by members of their family.

From the time of planting, the palm takes



ready to harvest. There is no special season and harvesting continues all year. Only the shoots are used, before the leaves have opened. They are cut at the base with a knife and strung into bundles of 112 shoots for transporting. The palm can only be kept for 2 or 3 days after cutting before it deteriorates, so processing must begin straight away.

## PROCESSING THE STRAW

We arrived at a village north of Santa Elena on the western coast, one and a half hours drive from Guayaquil. The climate here is very dry, mainly bush and scrubland. Most of the people work with the palm. It is a family affair and the knowledge has seeped into their veins over many generations.

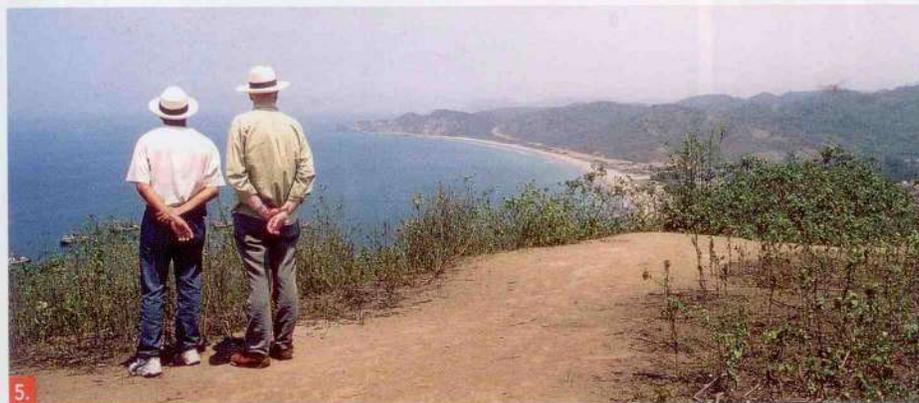
PICTURES: 1. Victor shows us how to inspect the weave; 2. The mountain women walk purposefully, always carrying huge bundle straw on their backs; 3. Map; 4. Everywhere you look there are hats drying in the sun; 5. Ecuador has some stunning landscapes!

## WEAVING

There are two regions where the traditional art of weaving is carried on. In the coastal province of Manabi are the town of Montecristi and in the mountains of the Andes, around the city of Cuenca. Weaving on the coast is done predominantly by men and some women. The coastal weavers use the finest quality straw and will take, on average, two to three months to weave one hat! In the



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mountains it is only women who weave, they use coarser straw and will usually weave one hat in two days.

### MONTECRISTI

The name of this town has always been associated with the very finest Panamas. It is here that the finishers and blockers are situated and where the hats are shaped, sold and exported to the world. But the weaving itself is carried out in small villages close to Montecristi.

### THE WEAVERS OF PILE

The village of Pile specialises in weaving the very finest straw bodies, for the Superfino Montecristi. The weavers select the best straw and split it using their thumbnails. Superfino hats are pre-paid for when ordered, so as to guarantee the availability of the finished product. Each company that has ordered a hat will sign or stamp the hat when it is started, so

that the company can trace it through all stages of processing and knows that it is theirs when finished.

### CUENCA

Four hours drive from Guayaquil, this time in a southeasterly direction lies Cuenca. The third largest city in Ecuador. It is tucked away in the high Andes at 2,353 metres above sea level and is a complete contrast to fast moving Guayaquil. Cuenca has many tourists, it is very beautiful, with cobblestone streets, fast winding rivers, a skyline of shining church domes and colonial houses with graceful ironwork balconies.

Although there is some weaving carried out in Cuenca, the main industry here is the 'finishing' of the hat bodies and the blocking and trimming of hat shapes. There are over 100 workshops, plus the very largest factories in Ecuador, and there is more of a sense of mass production here

compared to Montecristi.

Weaving is carried out by Indian women, in their homes in the surrounding mountain areas. Agents and merchants visit the women, selling them straw and buying their finished hat bodies, which they then sell to the factories and workshops in Cuenca.

### FACTS & FIGURES

- Approx. 800,000 hats/bodies per year are exported from Ecuador
- Capital of Ecuador is Quito, the second highest capital of the world
- Population: 14.3 million (UK 58.3)
- Ethnic mix: Mestizo (people of mixed Indian and European descent) 60%; Indian 20%; Black 10%; White 10%
- Ecuador adopted the United States dollar (USD) as its currency in 2000
- The climate is tropical along the coast, becoming cooler inland at higher elevations; tropical in Amazonian jungle lowlands
- Ecuadorians themselves do not call them Panama hats, but '*sombreros de paja toquilla*' or "hats of toquilla straw"

We would like to thank the following for their assistance:

- Department of Tourism, Guayaquil
- Ecu-Andino, Guayaquil, Ecuador
- Fundación Cerro Verde, Montecristi
- La Casa del Sombrero, Cuenca
- The Hotel Orilla del Rio, Guayaquil
- And all the harvesters, processors and weavers of Ecuador



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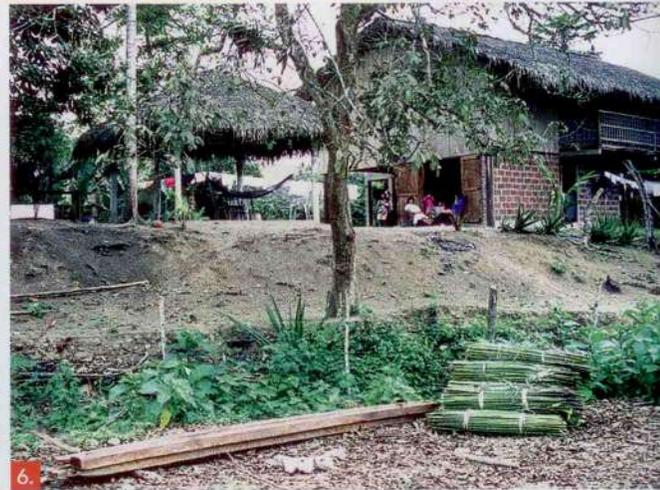
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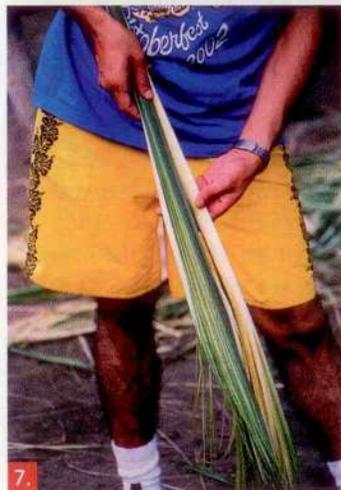
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1. This hat brim shows both types of weave. The Montecristi weave is tighter, denser, stronger and holds the shape better. The Brisa weave, used here for the main part of the brim, is lighter, softer and more economical to produce.

2. If you look inside the crown on a woven Panama hat you will see a number of rings within the weaving. It is where new strands have been started and denotes the quality of the straw. A medium quality will show up to 10 rings, whilst the finest quality can show up to 32.

3. The jungle like Toquilla palm plantation.

4. Cutting a stalk of the Toquilla palm. Only the young shoots are used, before the leaves have opened up.

5. The stalk is opened out, showing the inner fibres which are used to make the 'straw'.

6. The stalks are strung together into bundles of 112 pieces and wait to be transported on to the processors. Approximately seven shoots are needed to make one medium quality hat.

7. At the processors the palms are hit on the ground to separate the fibres.

8. They are then split, using a special tool with a metal point. The green leaves are taken out as they make the straw too black when it is boiled. Leaves that are too soft are put aside and used later to thatch the houses.

9. The ends are chopped and they are tied into bundles of 8 called 'an ocho', ready for boiling.

10. The entire family works together to process the straw, certain processes are done just by the women and other traditionally by the men. The palm arrives here in bundles and leaves as 'straw'.



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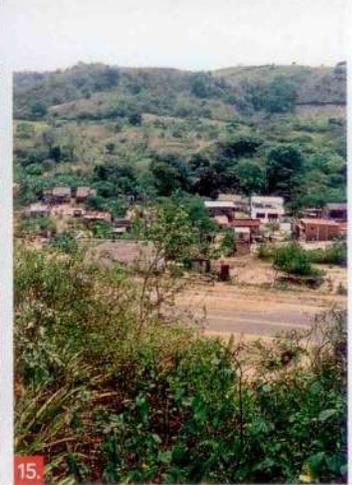
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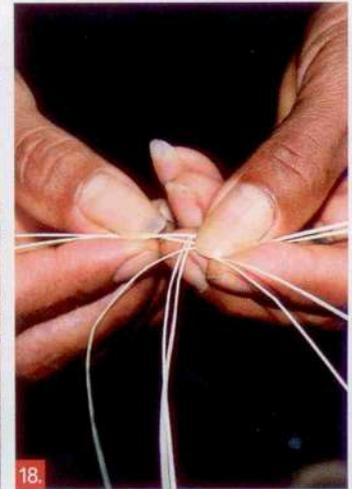
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11. & 12. They boil the palm in a large cauldron of hot water for about 20 minutes. It needs to be stirred constantly.

13. The bundles are taken out and hung over a frame to drain.

14. The straw is then hung in the sunshine to dry for 2-3 days. As it dries the straw shrinks, changing shape from flat strips to round strands. The best quality straw is naturally lighter, but the coarser straw can be soaked in a sulphur mixture to bleach it. The men move and

shake the straw regularly to avoid the strands sticking together.

They gather the straw in bundles, looking at the type and quality, ready for collection, or to deliver direct to the weavers. Buyers come with big trucks every 3 to 4 weeks and each family negotiates separately with the buyers.

15. The village of Pile. Since 1999 weaving has been taught in the school here to try to keep the traditions of this area alive. This is a joint project between Fundación CerroVerde in Montecristi and Kunst & Design from

Germany with the help of funding from the European Union.

16. In Pile we climbed a steep hill, with no path, to reach the cottage of 70 year old Mr Alfonso Espinal who has been weaving straw since he was 8.

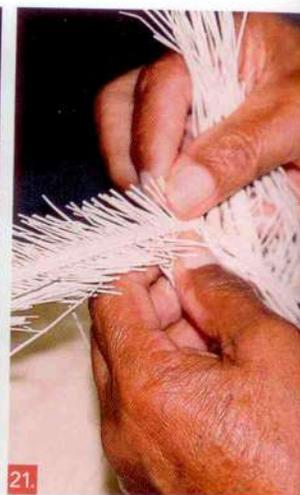
17. & 18. The circular 'button' at the centre of the crown is the trademark of the Panama and also the weaver. Mr Senovio Espinal showed us how to start. Beginning at the centre of the crown with 8 strands, 4x4 in the shape of a cross. It's a lot harder than it looks!



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19. Mr Alfonso Espinal weaving. By leaning over the hat, with his chest supported by blocks of wood and a pillow, the straw can be woven very tightly. The weavers keep a bowl of water at their side, to moisten their hands to keep the straw supple. Alfonso told us that the weaving is only done in the early morning, or late at night when there is sufficient humidity. During the day the hat bodies are covered with a damp cloth. (The men work on the land during the day). A 'Superfino Montecristi' can take up to 8 months to complete.

20. The weavers grow their thumbnails to assist them in separating the fine strands.

21. & 22. The hat bodies then travel on to Montecristi to be 'finished'. Here any loose strands in the weave are stitched through and knotted and then each section of the brim is pulled tight, over and over again, before the edges are formed by weaving back into the brim.

23. And the finished product, a fine Panama Hat from Ecu-Andino, woven in Pile and 'finished' in Montecristi.

24. Up in mountains, around Cuenca, weaving is womens work. The women weavers walk purposefully, wearing traditional costumes.

huge bundles of straw on their backs. They all wear a felt or Panama trilby, which has a certain style of its own and is stiffened rock hard to survive any weather.

25. Many weavers will buy straw at their local market.

26. The weavers also bring their finished hat bodies to the market and sell to merchants who supply the factories in Cuenca. Merchants also visit the weavers out in the country, to sell them straw and collect their work.

27. We visited the home of one weaver in an isolated mountain cottage, sitting in the hot sunshine with her two children and chickens, while she nimbly weaved away. The straw here is coarser and it is possible to weave all through the day so it takes less time to complete. It takes two days to make one hat body.

28. The hat bodies from the mountain weavers are bought by travelling agents and sold on to be 'finished' at factories and wholesalers in Cuenca. The first stage is to dampen the unfinished hat bodies in large vats of warm water.

29. When colours are needed, the hat bodies are dyed in this large pot which is

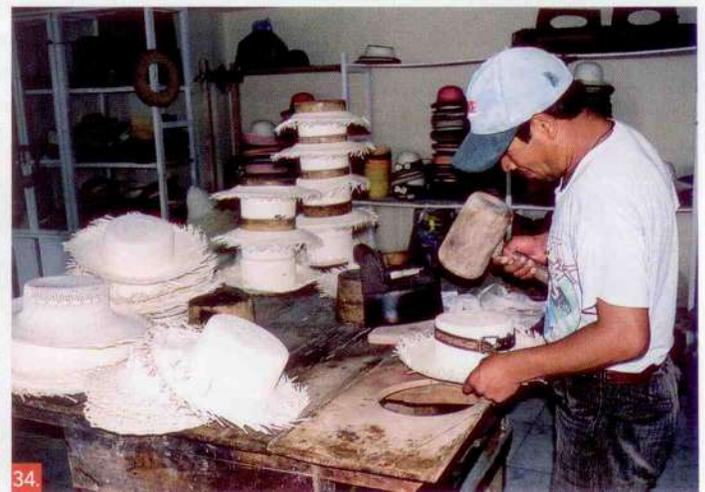
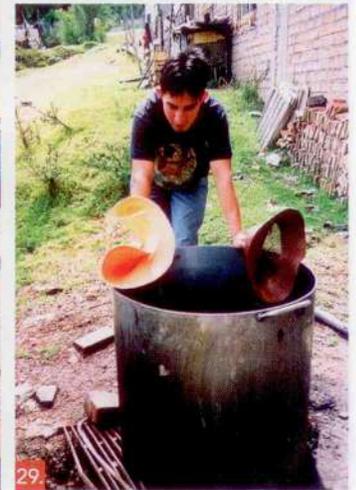
30. If a 'natural' finish is required the hat bodies are bleached, in order to get a uniform colour. Bleaching is carried out in these tanks using a solution containing sulphur.

31. After bleaching or dyeing the straw bodies are left out in the sun to dry.

32. The edges of the unfinished hat bodies are tightened, in the same way as at Montecristi and then a crochet hook is used to pull back the fibres into the brim, to secure them before cutting.

33. Blocking was a complete marvel to me. The body was placed dry onto the block and just using fingers was moulded to shape. A huge iron was then pressed onto the crown (i wanted to shout "use a cloth!", but restrained myself). It is heated with hot charcoals that are put inside under the handle. A leather belt is strapped around the crown once smooth. The crown is then turned upside-down and placed in a hole in the table. The brim is then stretched by hand and ironed flat.

34. The final process, is a gentle hammering all over to get the weave even. Finally the hat body is gently





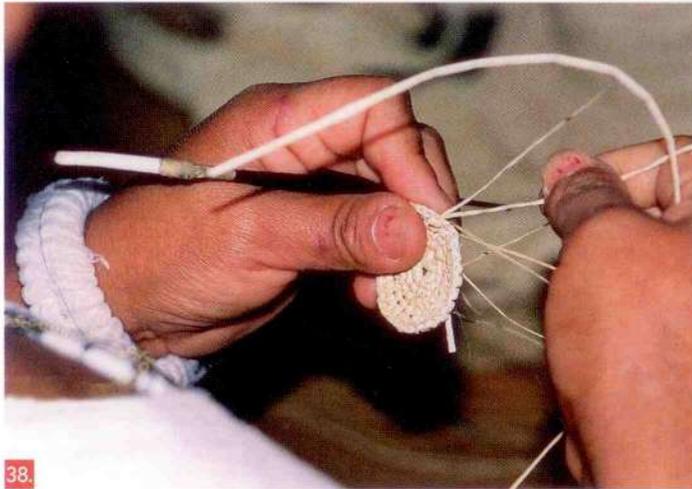
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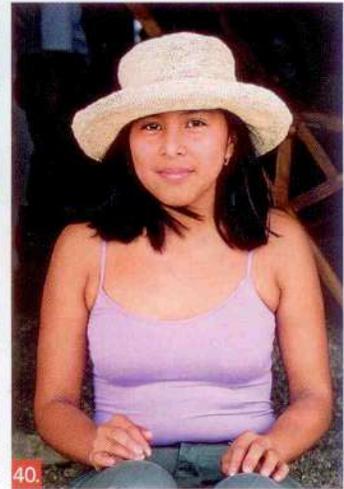
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35. After hand blocking the shape is passed through a hydraulic press three times.

36. Between visits to the hydraulic press the hat crowns are stiffened with a cloth and dry naturally in the sunshine.

37. A finished breton shape.

38. The Toquilla straw works very well crocheted. The woman split the straw to the required size before they crochet. They start by making a button and keep going round and round.

39. Starting at the tip of the crown they must adjust the fullness down to the brim. It takes a weaver a week to make (crochet) three hats.

40. A proud weaver shows her finished hat, known as 'The Hippie' style.

### THE ART OF CROCHET

The process of crocheting the Toquilla straw is relatively new. In 2001 we came to Libertad Bolivar, on the Pacific coast, where Ecu-Andino had recently set up a co-operative for the local women, and we watched as they sat in groups chatting whilst skilfully crocheting hats and bags. The older generation trained the young in the skills of the past.

Before the co-op people had stopped weaving hats in this area some decades previous. People grew only the palm leaves in their fields and processed them into weavable fibres to sell to the big hat

manufacturers. In 2001 there were 250 woman involved. The co-op garenteed woman 8 hours work a day, at a set rate, with which they knew they could feed their families. Husbands were also employed nearby, harvesting the Toquilla straw.

This, our second visit, took us to the house of Pablo Lainez, the co-ordinator between the community here and the project manager at Ecu-Andino in Guayaquil, a very important man! We asked him if there had been many changes since 2001? "Yes there have, the department of tourism and the local government have helped in many ways to improve the village, one of the projects was to built more small shops along the main street giving the community a better way to show their skills in making crochet and craft items. They want to encourage more tourists and there are plans to put in a small restaurant. The crochet production has grown a lot, we now have over 800 women who work on crochet, not only here in Libertad Bolivar but in 18 surrounding villages. They bring the finished items here to my office each week and we give them their wages plus the next week's orders. Life has improved a great deal since 2001."

PICTURE LEFT: The woman who crochet - with Alejandro, Victor and Nigel in the 'back garden' of their office in Libertad Bolivar in 2001



# Sombrero-Arte

Not only is Ecuador a country of many contrasts, it also has a strong artistic tradition. We explore the many connections between Art and the Panama Hat...

Photos of Allan Jeffs sculptures this page by Fernando Mieleles



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## JOURNEY TO THE ANTARCTIC

In February 2012 the Ecuadorian artist Allan Jeffs took twelve pieces of sculpture, each four feet high, to the frozen Antarctic. They were identical pieces resembling human figures in the act of meditation or prayer, made from a compound of fibreglass covered with a Toquilla palm shawl. Allan Jeffs told us about his project; "I wanted to take the craftwork of skilled weavers from Pile, from Montecristi and along the western coast of Ecuador, who in their own cultures look out onto the open sea. To take the spirit of an ancestral profession, a garment woven by the hands of artisans, into an atmosphere of light and peace. The Toquilla straw represented to me, many hundreds of years of craftwork, it represented good people who carry years of history on their backs who could never reach this latitude."

Of the twelve original pieces, only five survived the journey. Once in Antarctica they were stacked and carried by Jeffs to eight specific locations over the course of fifteen days, then set up as installations in the stillness of the frozen environment. But why Toquilla straw, we asked; "It is a material I have been associated with for almost all my life. I watched as it was being woven, and respected this most beautiful

talent. As a material for sculptors the Toquilla straw shawl was relatively light for transportation and behaved well with the cold temperatures. Toquilla's historical burden was perfect for my work as an artist." With only the penguins for company the figures looked out onto a bleak, cold, serene world. Quiet, singular, radiating the spirit of Ecuador throughout the stillness of Antarctica. Allan Jeffs was accompanied by film maker Fernando Mieleles, to record and document the experience.

## MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND CONTEMPORARY ARTS, GUAYAQUIL

This contemporary museum, known simply as the MAAC, commands a spectacular position on the wide promenade overlooking the river Guayas. Opened in late 2004 MAAC focuses on archaeological finds from around

PICTURES: 1. Allan Jeffs sculptures against the harsh backdrop of the Antarctic; 2. Allan making the final adjustments to his installation; 3. Inquisitive penguins come to have a good look; 4. A clay model figure from the MAAC



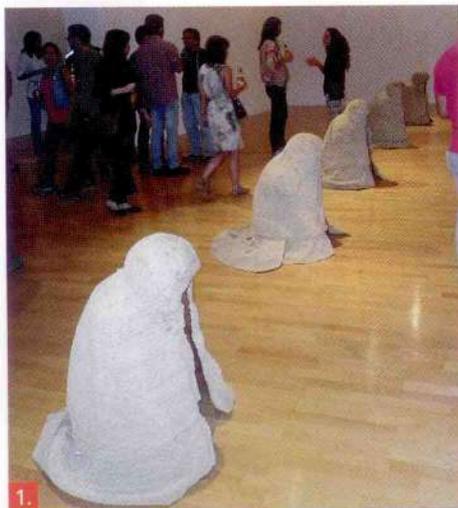
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Ecuador, including some relatively recent discoveries from the coastal regions. One wing is dedicated to a large collection of Ecuadorian contemporary art, as well as a smattering of works by international artists.

In August last year the company Ecu-Andino in collaboration with the museum curated an exhibition showing that their ancestors from the coast had used their creativity and artistry to produce the most unique headwear. Modern day contemporary styles were placed beside clay models dating back to between 500BC and 650AD, and, looking at the two styles together – well not much had changed!

On our visit to the museum in October the sheer number of these small, hatted figures, wearing diverse styles of headwear was quite amazing. The exhibition in August also included the five-piece installation of Toquilla straw sculptures by Allan Jeffs, which had survived their trip to the Antarctic.

It is believed that the word 'Toquilla' originated with the Conquistadores who,



when they arrived on the coast, saw the indigenous people wearing eccentric straw hats. These were of such fine straw, that they first thought they were made from bat wings. The hats reminded them of the headwear worn by Spanish nuns, called 'Tocas' but it was of such very fine straw that they named it Toquilla (superfine Tocas). In those times hats were not fashion items, but were necessary to protect wearers from the sun.

### THE JUGGLERS TALE

Was it fate that brought Mauro Vadillo into our Panama story? A juggler and balladeer by profession, who earned his living 'working' on the streets of Guayaquil as an entertainer using basic Panama hats. That is until one day, when he was seen juggling at the busy crossroads outside the new offices of Ecuia-Andino. Invited in, it emerged that Mauro was also a singer of folk music, especially of the ballads sung many years ago by the weavers of the Toquilla straw, the typical music of the coast. Born near Pile in Manabi province, Mauro listened to his grandfather singing and telling stories of old, about the importance of the Panama hat between a man and a woman and that a good hat would attract the eye of a beautiful woman. And then, if a man and woman wanted to kiss, they would hold up his hat

### The Song of the Manabita Weaver

With a mould of hope  
And carnation fingers  
Her hat is knitting,  
The most beautiful Manabita.

How thin are the threads,  
So thin like herself,  
Oh, who could be Horacio Hidrovo  
With the honeycomb of poetry  
To sing in scents,  
A song of straw

Tell me beautiful Manabita  
Is it true that in your eyes  
You knit with thin water  
And in diamonds you crystallise  
That thin hat

My lips are telling  
Prayers of ambrosia  
Weaver weaves, weaves  
From carnation fingers  
Weaver weave and unite my verses to  
your straw.

(Our English translation does not do justice to the beauty of the song in the original Spanish)

To see Mauro juggling panama hats, visit our youtube page:

[www.youtube.com/thehatmagazine](http://www.youtube.com/thehatmagazine)

PICTURES: 1. Allan Jeffs sculptures at The MAAC; 2. Mauro Vadillo the talented hat wearing busker; 3. & 4. Modern day contemporary styles were placed beside clay models dating back to between 500BC, at the Toquilla Straw Exhibition at The MAAC; 5. Ricardo with his 'Monkey Jungle' collection

### MONKEY JUNGLE

It was in one of Guayaquil's more affluent suburbs that we met Ricardo Tay-Lee Lama. A young man who dropped out of medical school to pursue a career as a designer of exclusive Panama Hats. Always interested in painting, especially murals on any type of surface, he began sketching on hats, then bags, suits, in fact everything! Completing a course in graphics, Ricardo refined his 'style', a cross between naive art and sophisticated graffiti, and began to develop a style of graphics that was instantly recognised as 'Monkey Jungle'. "My designs are quite strong, in positive colours, each one signed and numbered, with no two the same. The themes are inspired by stages in my life, by nature, music or games... and I can complement the hat by painting clothing to match. So far I have had more than 200 commissions, plus I sell to a store in Paris. It feels very good to be bringing the panama hat to the younger generations, it's very encouraging."

[www.facebook.com/MonkeyJungleRTI](http://www.facebook.com/MonkeyJungleRTI)

**SOMBRERO-ARTE**

Our journey to Guayaquil, in Ecuador, last October was primarily to attend the first ever 'Sombrero-Arte' (Hat-Art), an evening event launched by the art community in Guayaquil, and supported by Mr Joseph Garzosi, Director of the Guayaquil Department of Tourism and Mr Alejandro Lecaro of Ecu-Andino.

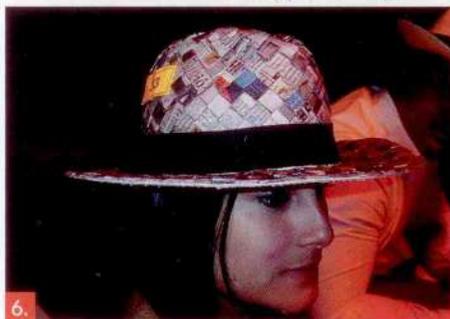
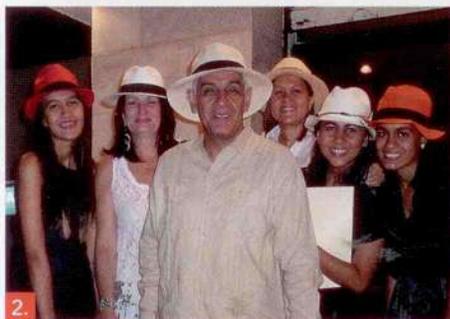
The significance of this gathering of the established art sector bestowed a certain credibility to the Panama hat, as an item of beauty, for its technical skills and for the part it has played in the history and culture of Ecuador. In her introduction, Ms Luisa Caputi de Cuesta, President of The Social Foundation of Feminine Culture, told us; "As part of our cultural heritage the Central Arts Theatre presents this first edition of Hat-Art to strengthen our national identity in regards to the making, weaving and artistry of the traditional Panama Hat. Our audience this evening will take an art based view of this most treasured symbol of our culture, recognised throughout the world. We are on a crusade to present the Panama hat as a unique item, to raise its identity as a highly skilled craft product that brings together art, beauty and culture."

On the purchase of a ticket, each guest was given a plain Panama hat to embellish for the event, using whatever art or design techniques that they wished. The judging panel were then to select a winner during the evening, and the main prize would be a voyage to the Galápagos Islands, a trip of a lifetime.

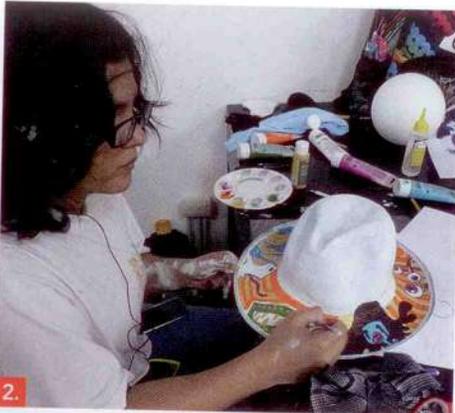
The evening brought together a rare combination of talents, and the hats decorated and worn by the audience far exceeded the expectations of the judging panel. Eventually six finalist were chosen, and from these a winner! The programme of song, poetry and music, combined to make this a unique evening of friendship and cultural artistry, based on a heritage product of Ecuador.

The Judges for the competition were; Nigel & Carole Denford from The HAT Magazine; Marina Gutierrez, French agent for Ecu-Andino; Katja Knoch, German agent for Ecu-Andino; Montserrat Chicaiza the PR Director for the Teatro Centro de Arte, Guayaquil and Peter Mussfeldt a Professional artist from Guayaquil.

It is hoped to make this a biennial event (see page 44) which will attract international entries and help promote the Panama hat and sustain the weaving



PICTURES: 1. Music by Bambú Ensemble; 2. Alejandro Lecaro with his family and Marina Gutierrez (from L to R Andrea, Marina, Alejandro, Jackeline, Paula and Daniela); 3. From L to R: Luzmila Nicolaide vice Perfecta of Guayas Province; Mrs Luisa Caputti de Cuesta, President of the Foundation Theatre Centre Art; artist Peter Mussfeldt; Marina Gutierrez and Katja Knoch from Ecu-Andino 4. - 8. Contestants in the HatArt competition; 8. The winning design from Ms Mrs Marigloria Cornejo included an iquana made from ceramic



**STUDENT'S HAT DESIGN COMPETITION**

As part of our search for artistic talent, a competition was organised at the University of Casa Grande in Guayaquil. At 11am on Wednesday morning we gave each of the students from the Visual Communications Department either an Ecuadorian felt or Panama shape, supplied by Ecua-Andino, to re-design, embellish or restructure. They had until 4pm to complete the task. (As we left the University, Alejandro Lecaro, of Ecua-Andino, bet us that only 50% of students would still be in the classroom at 4pm and only 50% of those would have completed the task! As it happened we won the challenge, as all the students were working like beavers when we arrived back at 3.30, and every student finished their design!)

It was a scene of utter chaos at 4pm, when gradually one by one the competition exhibits were completed. Considering that the students were not milliners or fashion designers, but mainly graphic designers, there was rare talent here. An amazing selection of colour, trims, graphics and ideas, all individual styles and an unexpectedly brilliant collection of designs. The hats were then displayed together whilst we selected the winner, Tita Wong Argenzia, who had used mini sweet-papers to produce a flattering, feminine, colourful Panama Hat Design.

Ms Marcia Gilbert de Babra, the Rector of University Casa Grande, told us a little about the university and its achievements;

"The University of Casa Grande was opened in 1992 as a private Communications School, based on a model of the most famous and creative school in Chile. It was the first of its kind in Ecuador, a free thinking, singular institution, certainly not what you would call a 'conventional school'. Parents were somewhat alarmed during the first years until the graduating students began to get very good jobs, then the families began to calm down. From this model we expanded our curriculum and became a Technical School, and then as more students were demanding university degrees, eventually became a University. This meant setting up two other schools, one in Design and one in Human Development. Our achievements have been quite amazing,

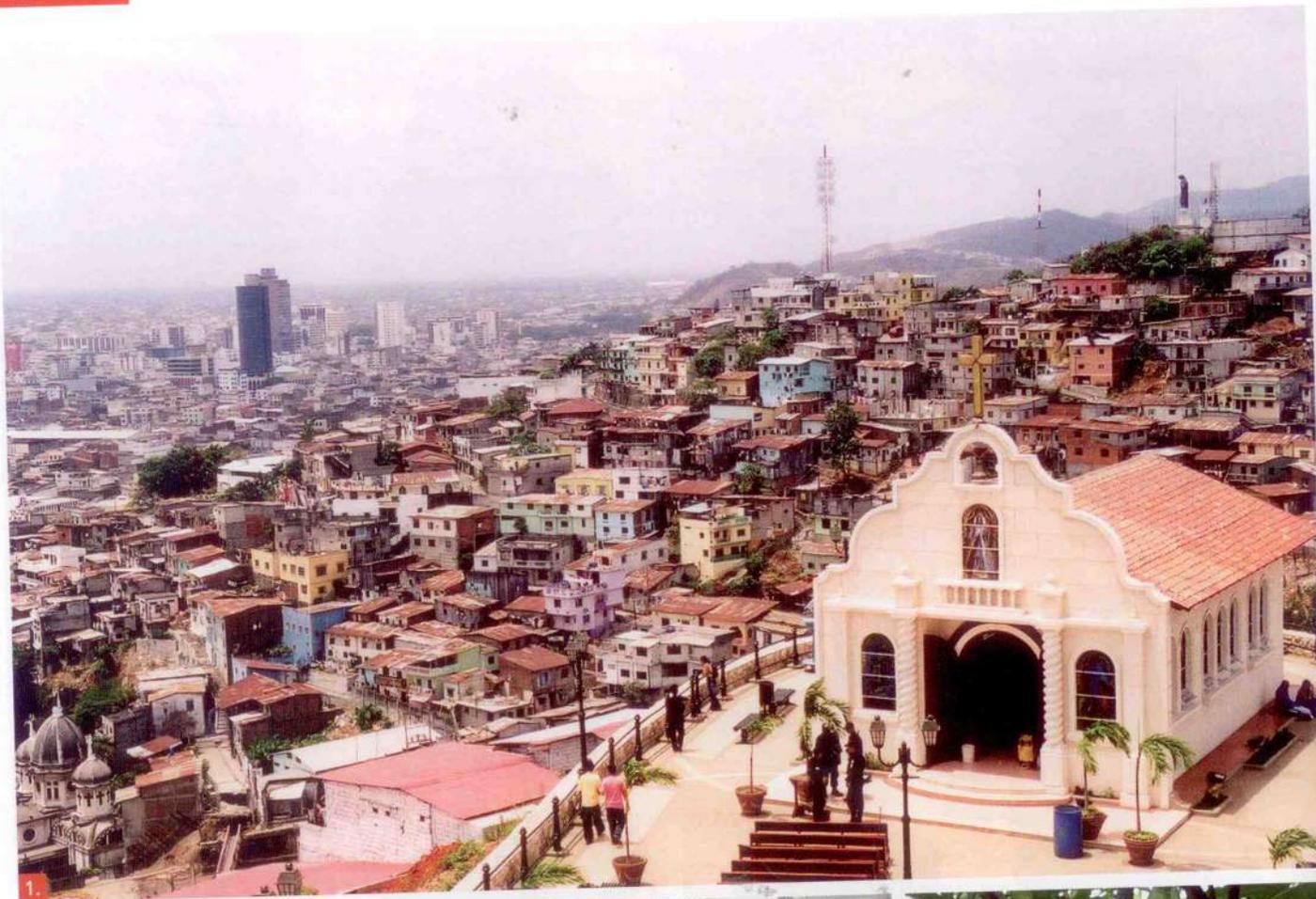
Casa Grande now win almost all the prize (90%) for educational achievements, as well as international awards.

At the present time the standard set nationally for education rises every year, in four years time 70% of teachers in Ecuador must have a PhD qualification by law, so an immense amount of work must be done. The university grants scholarships and through government pressure has to take a percentage of pupils from the state system, at a high financial cost. There is a positive move at the moment to achieve bilingual status. Most of our students (86-90%) speak English, and between 15-20% subjects are taught only in English. By 2014 we aim to increase this to 50% of subjects. For those students studying for foreign business degrees, three languages, including Chinese, are required. As University Rector it has been a hard bureaucratic journey, but I feel very proud of our educational achievements, and the high level positions, both national and international, that our graduates have achieved so far."



PICTURES: 1. The students selected a panama or felt hood to start the challenge; 2. & 3. Many students draw bold hand painted graphics; 4. Time is called and the hats are collected; 5. In five hours the hoods have been transformed; 6. Tita Wong Argenzia (left) was so excited to be crowned the winner; Page Right: The students of UCG model their millinery creations



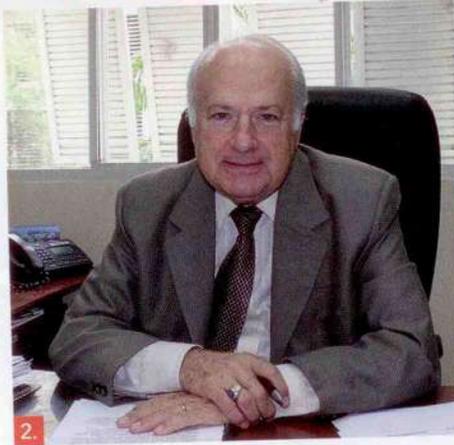


### TOURISM AND THE PANAMA HAT

We spoke to Joseph Garzosi, an ex-diplomat, who is the Director of Tourism for the city of Guayaquil, and who told us; "Ecuador is an incredibly diverse country, which can easily be divided geographically into three vertical regions of natural beauty - the dry coastal region, the highlands and mountainous Andes and the eastern jungle. It also has the good fortune to be blessed with many of the world's most sought after natural resources such as bananas, high quality cacao for making chocolate, coffee, flowers and, of course, the very famous Toquilla palm, from which we produce the straw for the Panama Hat.

The Galápagos Islands, also owned by Ecuador, with its rich fauna and sea life attracts many visitors who must begin their journey from mainland Ecuador either by small plane from Guayaquil or by boat. Quito, the capital, is a popular destination for tourists, mainly from the USA and Spain, but now it is the turn of Guayaquil, Ecuador's business heartland, and its largest city, to open its doors to a new generation of visitors.

A tour of Guayaquil can offer a stroll along the modern promenade that overlooks the mighty Guayas river, beautiful parks, an improving cuisine, countless species of birds and wildlife,



hardworking, artistic and welcoming for all its visitors. From my experience of international travel with the diplomatic service I know that Guayaquil has a great deal to offer. It is however the Panama Hat that is central to my plan, this simple piece of headwear with its known heritage can, even today, motivate people, can recreate a culture and a craft, and can, by its classic elegance, attract international tourism.

Therefore, with the co-operation of The Hat Magazine, the Department of Tourism for Guayaquil have planned to organise, beginning in 2014\*, a Biennial Sombrero-Arte (HatArt) event, every two years, that will not only include this vast city, but will take visitors to the coastal regions to find the growing Toquilla palm, and to



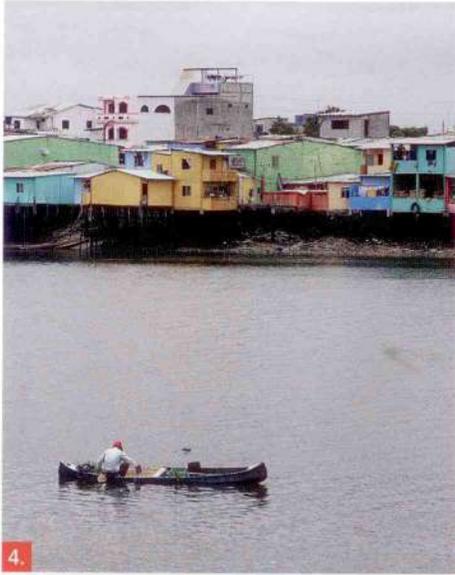
who crochet, and understand the meaning and the culture that lies behind the words 'Panama Hat'. [www.visitaguayaquil.com](http://www.visitaguayaquil.com)

If you would like to receive further details later in the year please e-mail The HAT Magazine at: [info@thehatmagazine.com](mailto:info@thehatmagazine.com)

### THE HOTEL AND THE PANAMA HAT

On the far side of the river, within a small residential area, is the Hotel Orilla del Rio. Decorated in traditional Spanish style with just six rooms, and a motto that reads 'From your Home to our Home'. It is owned by Mrs Sara de Garcia and her husband Francisco and opened as a hotel in 2001. Before then it was her family home until her sons, one by one, moved on to take up international careers.

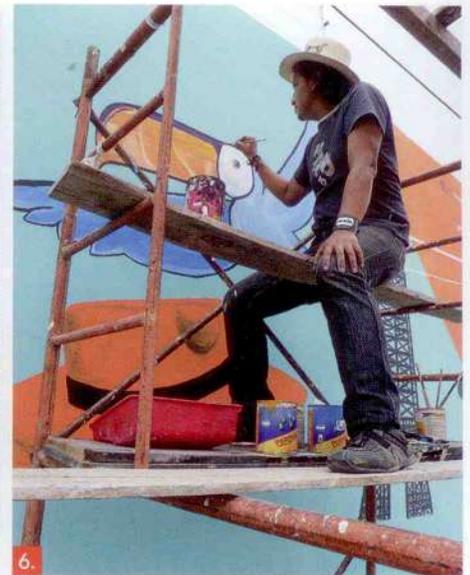
"Most of our visitors are tourists on the



4.



5.



6.



7.



8.

way to the Galápagos Islands, but they do love the history of the Panama hat, the displays we have throughout the hotel and the many old photos hung on the walls, of scenes of the country and the workers, all wearing their traditional straws. Yes I think it is very good for the people, especially the young people of Ecuador to have this tradition, and this craft culture that nowadays is so precious. We certainly hope we can be a part of this story, through our good service and generosity, to welcome visitors from every part of the world.”  
www.hoteldelrio.com

### THE MANAGER & THE PANAMA HAT

At the Hotel Orilla del Rio, the manager, Augusto Espinoza, told us that he was studying for a PhD in Administration of Tourism Enterprise. For his final thesis Augusto was researching the ‘History and Culture of the Panama Hat’. “My project is to recover the identity of the Panama hat, because I feel that this item plays a very important part in the history and culture of Ecuador. In recent years many people in Ecuador have lost contact with ‘the

PICTURES: 1. The stunning view looking over Guayaquil; 2. Mr Joseph Garzozi, the Director of Tourism for the city of Guayaquil; 3. The local Plumeria (Frangipani) flower; 4. A lone fisherman stands out against the populated riverside; 5. Owners of the Hotel Orilla del Rio; 6. Local artist Felix Cabrera working on the panama mural; 7. Augusto Espinoza wants to reconnect the young generation with the panama hat; 8. The mural, work in progress  
9. Poor housing has been restored and given a spectacular coat of paint

Panama’, especially the young generation who see it as ‘old fashioned’. My own family come from Manabi Province, close to Pile, where my grandfather always wore a stylish Panama, although he was never a weaver. Since taking on this project I have travelled a lot, to meet the customers and the producers. I genuinely respect the weavers, who live a very peaceful and simple life, for their work and dedication to the task. Maybe they don’t have the opportunities, the education or the money, but if you talk with them you can feel a passion. My fear now is that in ten years time there will not be one person left who retains these skills, as these people today are all more than 50 years old. Therefore

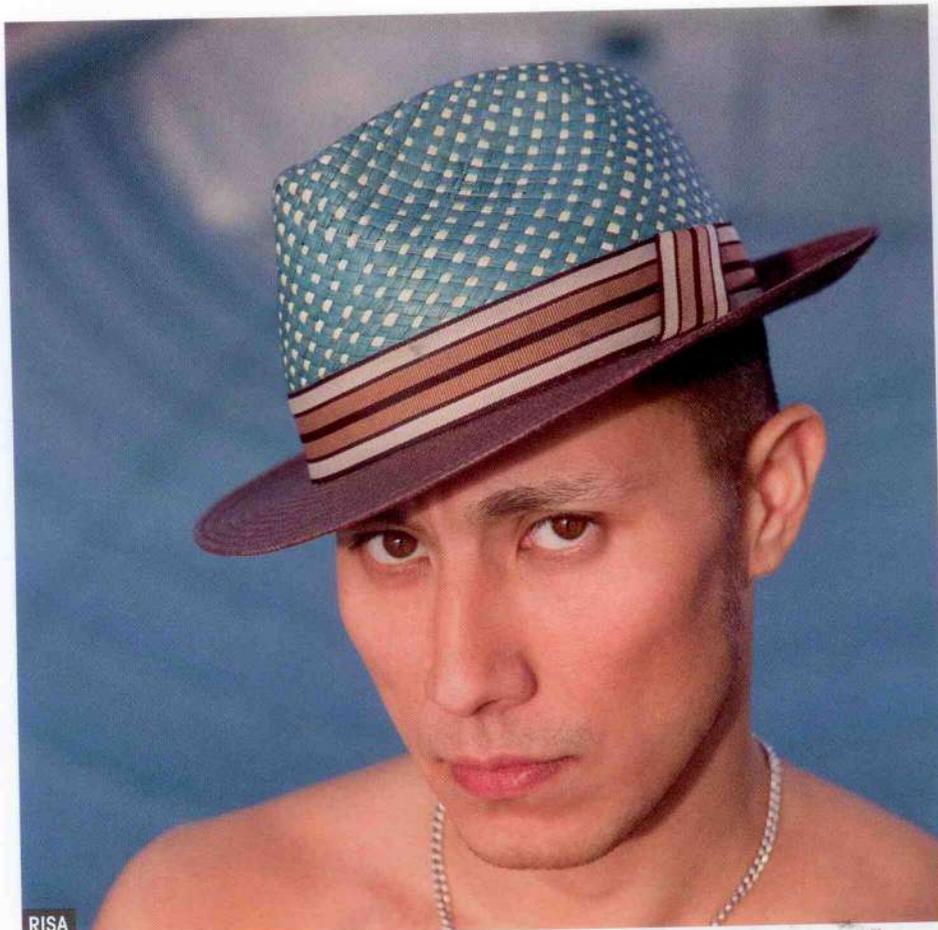


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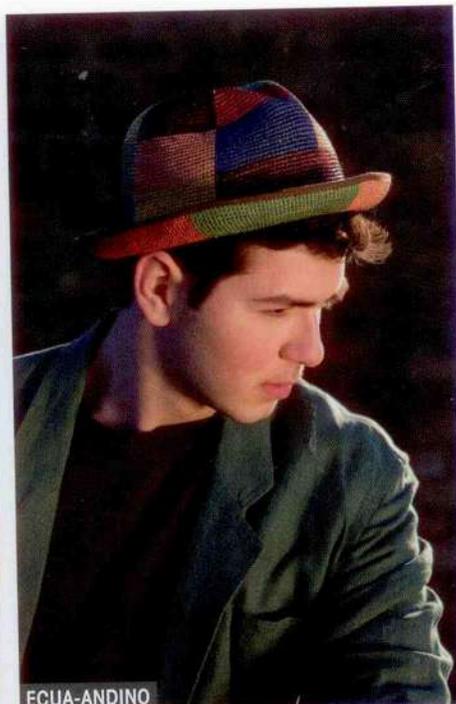
I would like to be involved in creating businesses for the young people so that they may retain this industry, to help future generations to be proud and to succeed. Tourism will certainly play its part by encouraging visitors to Ecuador to learn more about and understand a product that has the true Ecuadorian spirit.”

### THE MURAL

To adorn the exterior of their new premises, situated at a major junction near the airport in Guayaquil, Ecua-Andino commissioned the artist, Felix Cabrera, to paint a mural. This was just being completed during our visit and depicts the Panama hat and its place in the world



RISA



ECUA-ANDINO

# The Panama Comes of Age

The Panama Hat has come of age, from being a natural straw worn for protection from the sun, to becoming a desirable fashion accessory with an image and texture entirely its own. This year, the choice of styles, colours and shapes, take the Panama even further, with contrast crowns, patchwork, crochet and fine Montecristi weaves. From cool fedoras and elegant top hats for the man, and hip trilbys and feminine styles for the ladies. We present here, an amazing selection of shapes and styles for this coming summer season





PACHACUTI



I.D. HATS

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Wide fedora also available in a strong palette of colours  
[www.anthonypeto.com](http://www.anthonypeto.com)
- **BAILEY** *USA*  
Trend-setting, unisex Panama bowler  
[www.baileyhats.com](http://www.baileyhats.com)
- **ECUA-ANDINO** *Ecuador*  
Patchwork crochet panama and ladies in blocked and soft lacy styles  
[www.ecua-andino.com](http://www.ecua-andino.com)
- **I.D. HATS** *The Netherlands*  
Panama cloche hat with a 30s influence  
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- **MAJESA LTD.** *UK*  
Panama top hat and elegant sinamay trimmed daywear  
[www.majesa.com](http://www.majesa.com)
- **MAYSER GMBH & CO.** *KG Germany*  
Tobacco pork pie and natural trilby  
[www.mayser.com](http://www.mayser.com)
- **OLNEY HEADWEAR** *UK*  
British style classic Panama with striped ribbon  
[www.olney-headwear.com](http://www.olney-headwear.com)
- **PACHACUTI** *UK*  
An updated country 'story'  
[www.pachacuti.co.uk](http://www.pachacuti.co.uk)
- **RISA M. GEISSMANN & CO** *Switzerland*  
Contrasting textured Panama in sharp colour combinations  
[www.risa.ch](http://www.risa.ch)
- **STETSON EUROPE** *Germany*  
A classic Montecristi trilby in white  
[www.stetson-europe.com](http://www.stetson-europe.com)

Photographer: Simon Armstrong

Assistant: Tom Ansell

Models: Alex Kim and Ardian Zeka from Swan

Model Management; Alexia and JJ from PA

Model Agency; Nathan Baker and Coco

Make-Up: Dawn Taylor and Emma Books

Location: Tollesbury Cruising Club

Stylist: Alice Denford

# A Conversation with... Edgar Sánchez and Alejandro Lecaro

Founding partners of Ecu-Andino, one of the few companies producing finished Panama hats in Ecuador

*Were either of you 'born in hat' as we say in Europe?*

**Alejandro:** No, not at all. Edgar and I were good friends at school and decided when we left to start a business together. Our first venture, 25 years ago, was selling local crafts, initially to tourists on the beach, and then from a small shop in the centre of Guayaquil. We had attended the German School in Guayaquil and spoke German well, and so decided to contact the German Chamber of Commerce (GCC) here in Ecuador to see if they would help us exhibit our handcrafted items in Germany. This was the year before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and with the financial assistance of the GCC we took part in our first international trade show in West Berlin. We made contact with about ten new companies and so, with the backing of the GCC, we sold our handicrafts for three years at exhibitions in both Berlin and Frankfurt and remained the only people doing this.

*When did you begin making and selling the Panama hat?*

**Edgar:** Alejandro is good with products and selling, and I am the 'numbers man', and he realised before long that the best known craft icon from Ecuador was the straw hat, the 'Panama Hat'. It was the most popular and the most recognised item of all our products. This was about 15 years ago, and so we changed the Ecu-Andino product range and concentrated on the 'hat', and that was the beginning. But we had one more lesson to learn! It took time, but eventually we realised that we didn't have to sell the Panama hat as a 'handicraft' item, no, it was actually seen by international customers as a quality, high-end fashion accessory, and when we realised that, it changed our whole perception of this product and we could then make our step upwards. From a craft base of clients, today more than 75% of our sales are for 'fashion' customers. We began by selling the traditional classic panama, and then expanded this range to include different versions, qualities and eventually fashion colours. Since then we have introduced different models, shapes and crochet styles, changing the balance to 45% classic styles and 65% fashion items. It is Alejandro's intention now to develop more items from the straw, new colours, shapes, bags etc...

*It must be a fine balance to retain the culture and the craftsmanship of Ecuador, and yet produce a fashion item at a commercial price?*

**Edgar:** What is difficult for us, making a craft item, is to keep that finishing quality. We are not like the Germans and Italians, who have streamlined factories where they produce a hat with a consistently high finish and size, it's very hard for craftsmen here to make the same product a hundred times. This is the reason why the majority of the exports in straw are for the bodies, because they don't have to be finished, sized or shaped. The downside of this trade is that when the



Alejandro Lecaro and Edgar Sánchez

brand in them. At least we have a name and a reputation and all our hats have a 'Made in Ecuador' label. Rafael Correa, the President of Ecuador, is trying to run a campaign to change the attitude of the people, so they recognise that the Panama hat is a quality product. I am trying to persuade him to alter the strategy of this campaign, so that all exports, even the bodies, must state somewhere that they are 'Handwoven in Ecuador'. To include a regulation that says that every body should be stamped, or heat branded so that it cannot be erased or wiped off.

*Is the price of a Panama hat artificially high, so as to keep its edge in the market place?*

**Edgar:** No, not at all. You must remember that weaving is a hand process, therefore slow and labour intensive. What dictates the prices of all the goods produced in Ecuador is our adoption of the American dollar. Twenty years ago we had our own currency, the Sucre, we had high inflation and the currency was weak, but like the Peseta and Drachma it was a cheap currency for producing craft items. When we converted to the US\$ everything became more expensive, just as changing to the euro was in Europe. For the handicraft industry, we must accept that we are now in a world market. There is not a problem in Ecuador with obtaining the straw, or with production, we have never not completed an order, delays perhaps, but that happens in any industry. To make a Panama body, before even the blocking begins, there are 7 or 8 major processes (see page 32). Therefore our main job is to oversee the work in the different communities, and to keep the standards as high as possible. Not only on the quality of the straw, but more importantly the quality of the processing of the straw.



The large modern showroom at Ecu-Andino's new premises in Guayaquil

**What is the breakdown of exports of finished hats and hat bodies, and is the balance between the two changing?**

**Edgar:** To get an idea of the scale of the straw industry in Ecuador, the average number of pieces exported, including finished hats, hat bodies and bags is approximately 800,000 a year, of which 40% are finished hats. This is actually small by comparison with the early 1930s when the highest recorded figure was 5 million pieces, mainly all bodies. The official Customs statistics show that for the first quarter of 2011 Ecu-Andino exported the largest number of finished hats, at 45,000, followed by Ortega at 11,000 and Ynappi at 7,900. If you look at the second quarter of 2011, Ortega exported 24,000 hats and Ecu-Andino 86,000, which was amazing considering we were operating in our old building on the fourth floor without a lift! The largest producer of hat bodies was Dorfzaun who, in 2010, produced 93,000 in just one quarter. These figures demonstrate how important the straw industry is to Ecuador and to the 3,500 people working within the hat industry here.

**What have been your biggest achievements so far?**

**Alejandro:** When I drive into Libertad Bolivar and see how this small town on the Pacific coast has gained in confidence and progressed, mainly from the women learning and teaching the skill of crocheting the toquilla palm, I feel very proud. When you came here in 2001 we had a workforce of 80 women and now this has increased to 800. The workforce are now not only from Libertad Bolivar but from the many surrounding villages. There are more small craft shops along the main road, where the women sell other craft items, and the general well-being of the people has improved and will improve even more.

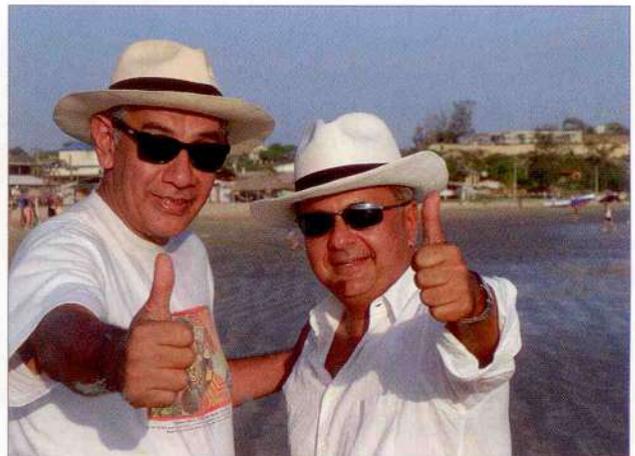
Our second biggest achievement was receiving an order in 2006 from the Ecuadorian government for 35,000 hats for the Football World Cup, played that year in Germany. The largest order we have ever received! This was only possible because of Katja Knoch, our German agent, who understood the process of importing the hats into Germany and handling the distribution. There were many companies in Ecuador at that time that exported, but they had little experience of exporting that quantity, and no experience of importing and distributing the goods in Germany.

**Have you any other projects in mind for the future?**

**Alejandro:** Yes, a major project we have been working on since moving to our new premises here. It took two years to



The park behind the Ecu-Andino premises, where they plan to construct a 'living' Panama hat museum



Life in Ecuador is good, it's not all work!

find this unique location in Guayaquil, positioned on one of the main cross roads in the city and only ten minutes drive from the airport. And at the rear offering a quiet cul-de-sac with parking, and in the centre a small abandoned park that we are now planning to develop into a living museum. We have already planted 350 toquilla palms, which will be part of our 'Panama Trail' designed with eight different 'stations' to demonstrate the processes of growing the straw and making the Panama hat. The living museum will replicate the coastal strip of Ecuador with its microclimate that is so perfect for the Toquilla palm. Many of the tourists and visitors to Guayaquil are businessmen or those attending a convention, who have little time to venture out of the city, but would like to see a little more of the culture and heritage of the country. In our offices across from the park we have already completed a showroom for both wholesale customers and those wishing to watch a film of the making of the Panama process and purchase a Panama Hat as a gift to take home. We hope also that the living museum will help to educate the local children and population, who can enjoy the journey around the different sections of the park and learn from past times the stories and anecdotes that keep the history and the culture of the Panama Hat alive.

**Ecu-Andino**

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