

## **An Unforgettable Summer**

**By Liliana Wendorff**

At the beginning of each school year, starting in first grade and through the last year of high school, the nuns at my school, *Colegio Nuestra Señora de Lourdes*, would make us write a composition entitled “What I did last summer.” I spent every summer with my family in Chullillachi, a fishing town two hours away from my home, so what was I supposed to write about? “I spent the summer at the beach” seemed to capture all my summer experiences, but there was a length requirement for this essay. The length increased as one was promoted to the next grade. In the first grade I probably wrote that my family went in the ocean every day and that we saw a huge turtle and even ate some, saw plenty of sharks, and that someone got stung by a sting ray. As the years went by, I may have described how the venom of the sting ray was sucked out of the victim’s foot and the brave person doing it would spit it on the ground. The stings, I would have written, caused so much pain that I saw several men, even tall, fat ones crying in pain. My uncle Lucho was one of them. Going fishing at 4:30 a.m. with the locals on a raft made of logs tied together with rope, and having half of a sheet for a sail may have come later. Our fishing trips lasted until 3 p.m. and we would enjoy seeing almost all the townspeople waiting by the shore to pull the nets full of fish. Alongside them was Aurora, our nanny, who had been praying all day for our safe return. We had gone without her permission, which we never asked for as it would have been denied. “It is dangerous,” Aurora would scold us. The last composition related to Chullillachi I ever wrote had to do with a tsunami that destroyed the villagers’ houses and took away their livelihood, as their boats were consumed by the sea. My parents, who had been working in Piura at the time of the tsunami, were so horrified at the news of our own house flooding that they discontinued our beach adventures. We could not understand why. We had had so much fun getting on top of the table in the flooded dining room and jumping down to the floor as if the whole house were a swimming pool. After that summer, they sold our house so we started going to friends’ houses in Colán, thirty minutes away from Chullillachi. I enjoyed spending the summer with Denise, my best friend, and her family. At night we would listen to the Beatles and dance. Other vacations included trips to the capital, Lima, where we visited museums and watched movies. Shopping in Lima was a lot of fun. We felt so sophisticated. That is where I tried my luck at smoking, with no success. I was never able to smoke without coughing.

In the summer of 2007, I had a chance to travel to Ecuador to teach Spanish to a group of students from an American college. I was contacted in the spring of the same year by the director of the program, who gave me the link to the camp where we would be staying. The pictures made the camp seem like paradise; it was located next to a river in the middle of the Amazon jungle. It was surrounded by lush vegetation and well-maintained grounds. The huts that housed students and faculty were modeled after the style of jungle housing: they were built on stilts

because of the heavy seasonal rains, and had thatched roofs. It was picture perfect, so I readily accepted the job.

As I prepared to leave for Ecuador, I purchased boots, mosquito nets for my head, mosquito repellent (lots of it), flashlights, and a backpack. I flew into Quito, the capital, and then I took a five-hour bus ride to where I was going to be staying for three weeks. Upon arriving, I was greeted warmly by the director, the students, colleagues, and camp staff. I was set up in a cabin all by myself. What a luxury, I thought. I was happy to have my independence. After settling there, I walked around the grounds and met more people. Everyone was friendly, and very excited. On this first day, I was dressed in jeans, a t-shirt, and sandals, so the mosquitoes almost ate me alive. I looked like I had chicken pox. I decided that starting the next day I would wear heavy socks, long pants and long sleeve shirts, like my world traveler sister had advised, in spite of the heat and humidity. After a healthy dinner prepared by the camp's staff, I got ready to go to bed.

My first night at the camp was eerie. The pitch black darkness made me uncomfortable. I remembered that, as a child, when I could not sleep, I would wake up my sister Elena so she would talk to me and keep me company. Now, not only was my sister far away somewhere on another continent, but I was hearing unrecognizable, ominous sounds. I wished she had been here when I had to get up to go get some water in the middle of the night. I took out my flashlight to make sure I would not step on any strange creatures. It was a wise move. Next to my flip flops there was a black scorpion which scurried away and didn't appear again until the next morning, hiding behind the night table. After this encounter, I was unable to sleep. The next day I was informed nonchalantly that scorpions were very common in the camp. Nobody seemed to be bothered by them. "The sting is painful," they explained, "but it will not kill you," Ecuador, one of the groundskeepers, assured me. The next night, right before going to bed, I went to the bathroom in my cabin, and just as I was about to sit down on the commode, right in front of my very eyes I saw, not an itchy bitsy spider, but rather a huge, extremely hairy tarantula. While my friends jokingly say that I was at the right place for seeing such a creature, I just left quietly, walked over to my bed and kept vigil all night from fear. Just think of how tired you would feel were you not able to sleep, but for a maximum of two hours, for two nights. The third night I was in bed with the mosquito net tucked nicely under the mattress when I heard this loud swiisshhhh! I could not see a thing, so I just wondered what it could be. "Birds? Flying snakes? Jumping tarantulas? Monkeys swinging from the roof?" I tried to guess, as tears rolled down my face not only from fear, but also exhaustion. In the morning, as I was reporting this latest horrifying incident, a biology professor told me that it was probably a vampire bat. He had seen their cave not far from the camp. He showed it to me and pointed to the teeth that differentiated them from a regular bat. The thought of being attacked by a *chupacabras* was so frightening that I packed my bags and moved to a hotel in the closest town thirty minutes away. There I was not only protected against strange creatures, but I had air conditioning and an internet connection.

Had I had these experiences while in school, my essays would have been phenomenal. In addition to what was happening at the camp, I could have related my daily bus trips. My daily commute was most entertaining, although crossing a flimsy bridge everyday with a bus packed with people, animals, and lots of goods to be sold was nerve-wracking. As people started filling up the bus at the station by the busy marketplace, street vendors got in and walked up and down the bus aisles to try to sell their merchandise. There were sellers of suckers, *Chiclets*, chocolates, *chifles*, bananas, baby clothes and hats, among other things. But there was one salesman that stood out. He sold something extraordinary: a plant that cured all ailments. He always wore the same old, ragged suit and tie, and carried his amazing product in a worn briefcase. His selling pitch was most remarkable, and effective. He explained in a serious tone, as he walked up and down the center aisle of the bus:

*I am here to offer you a product that cures cancer, diabetes, uterine cancer and cancer of the prostate gland. It is a plant that native peoples discovered thousands of years ago. They are your ancestors, friends. The Incas were wise men. I bring to you the plant in the form of a tablet for your convenience. I am not here to lie to you, but rather to help you. If you have diabetes, cancer, or your daughter has uterine cancer, this marvelous plant will cure all of that.*

He continued listing even more amazing qualities of his product. “Look,” he said as he took out a sensationalist paper with the headline YOUNG WOMAN GIVES BIRTH TO A TUMOR, “this story appears in this respectable newspaper, friend, and also in other national and even international papers.” He continued, “I am not lying to you. I think even CNN broadcast it. This young woman thought that she was pregnant and the fetus kept on growing and developing. When nine months passed and she did not deliver the baby, they took her to the hospital. The baby she had inside was not a baby, my friend. It was an 11-pound tumor. Look how ugly the malignant evil was,” he asserted showing the pictures to the passengers. His claims got even bigger when he said: “If you give this product to your daughter, to your granddaughter, or to your niece, this is not going to happen. This product cleans your uterus, the prostate gland, the kidneys and the liver. Your liver gets dirty with the *chicha* you drink, my friend. It turns your liver black and fetid.”

Surprisingly, many passengers seemed interested in what this skillful salesman had to sell. Some asked questions in a low voice. I thought to myself, “What a great story this would have been when I was attending my school.” He caught the attention of the guys when he claimed that the product helped women with frigidity, promoted prostate gland health and increased virility. He even promised sexual prowess for life. I thought, this sounds exciting, but I would not have been able to report it at my *colegio*, where the nuns were so afraid of exposing students to sex that they fast forwarded through movie scenes whenever the leading man got within a couple of feet of the leading lady. The man continued his efforts to try to motivate potential men customers:

*Do you know what the prostate is, my friend? It is what makes you a man. Without the prostate you would not be able to have children or even a woman. My product guarantees that you will always be a man, a real man, even in your nineties you could have children. What man does not like to do his duty? All women will like you, my friend.*

One day, he even did a demonstration on how his product cleaned your whole body. He said: “Watch how this wondrous plant cleans your pipes,” as he took out a glass of water and gave a tablet to a passenger, instructing him to drop it into the water. He shook the glass until the tablet melted in the water, turning it brown. A lot of curious eyes were following his experiment. He then explained: “You see my friend? This is what your body looks like on the inside, like a bottle of coca-cola, your insides are dirty and vile. With this plant I can clean your body.” Miraculously, he continued stirring until the water turned clear. His point had been made in a very palpable fashion. Passengers applauded enthusiastically. Finally, the man quoted the prices and assured everyone that his intention was not to make a profit for himself. He wanted to help his compatriots. He did this in the name of science. Instead of giving away the usual three boxes of 18 tablets each for the ridiculous price of three dollars, he would add a fourth one as a *llapa*. He added that babies could also benefit from this wondrous drug. “Your child could become a strong and fast soccer player, like Pelé or Maradona,” he affirmed.

Many people actually bought his product throughout the two weeks I rode the bus. Not wanting to appear incredulous, I confess I bought some for myself. Being Peruvian, I did not want to snub a “millennium cure of wise, indigenous peoples”—my ancestors, the Incas.

I remember this trip fondly. It was most educational. We learned what the typical foods were. One day we had lunch at the house of a native Quichua. It was a hut without electricity. This woman lived in her family’s compound. There, we tasted a delicacy: roasted *chonta* worms, which were actually good. The other food was bland. No salt or spices were used when cooking palms, pumpkins, and tubers. It made me long for delicious Peruvian food: *ceviche*, *chupe de camarones*, *seco de chavelo*, *papa a la huancaína*. Even a hot dog sounded scrumptious. Another time, I witnessed a mock Quichua wedding. The parents of the groom, as well as two godparents, line-danced first with a fake bride. After a while, the real bride and the groom came dressed simply in everyday clothes. I remembered the groom wore a white poncho. The parents of the groom knelt in front of the community elders and communicated the intentions of their son. After everything was agreed upon, everyone hugged each other and the dancing continued. No vows were exchanged. The traditional wedding meal consisted of a soup made with yucca and venison, which the groom had hunted himself in the area. *Chicha* made of yucca was served. I had had plenty of *chicha* drinking experience as a teenager. The food was served on the floor outside, on top of huge palm leaves, which also served as tablecloths. Afterwards, there was more social dancing. This would have been a great story, as we could have compared the Quichua traditions with the Peruvian wedding customs.

I will never forget this trip. I learned a lot about that part of the world. While I don't know if I would had been able to present all the stories in my assignment to the nuns, I feel it would have been nice to have other, more interesting options than just my summer at the beach for writing about my summer experiences as a child. As I have gotten older, however, I remember my days at Chullillachi as the happiest of my life. I was free to roam around the beach all summer picking up shells, taking long walks along the shore, watching spectacular sunsets, playing games with my seven brothers and sisters, and eating fresh fish. The fact that there were only two solid houses at the beach, ours and our friends', the Seminarios, which contrasted with the huts with packed dirt as floors of the locals did not matter to us. We befriended the fishermen and looked forward to seeing them every summer, right before Christmas when school was out.