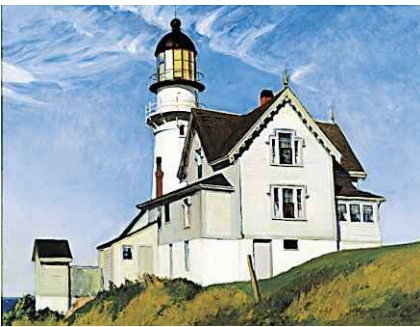


EXPLORE NEW ENGLAND | MAINE



PRIVATE COLLECTION

“Captain Upton’s House” (1927), from “**Edward Hopper’s Maine**” at Bowdoin College. **M4**



DAVID LYON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

In all their glorious and familiar sizes and fillings, **whoopie pies** gain official state status. **M5**



SUNDAY RIVER

Hiking, biking, birding, paddling, ziplining — it’s all among **10 things** to do for summer fun. **M7**



DAVID LYON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE (AND BELOW)



Hidden Pond cabins offer resort-style amenities, gardens — and s’mores. **M4**

ECUADOR

Aiming high

Climbing Andean peaks, in desolate grassland, amid volcanic plumes — and llamas

BY BRIAN IRWIN | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

QUITO — Edgar Ricardo Vaca Vega met his wife inside a volcano. The year was 1983 and the town of Baños, the Ecuadorian gateway to the Amazon, was a bustling climbing destination, with outfitters on every corner touting guided trips up Tungurahua, the purportedly extinct stratovolcano that hovers over the humid town. The summit crater was chosen as the site for a university mountaineering club conference. Patricia Sanchez Alonso, a Colombian studying in Quito was there, as was Vega, a student at a Quito technical school. The couple met in the inactive crater. Five years after the conference they wed, and Vega has been an outfitter and guide in the high peaks of the Ecuadorian Andes ever since.

But the hot spot of their first meeting is gone. In 1999 Tungurahua (“Tongue of Fire”) erupted again, and has not stopped spewing volcanic ash since its rebirth.

Vega is a friend of a friend and although we were not using his guiding services, we relied on him to provide our transportation, make our local reservations, and cook for us during our two-week climbing expedition in May.

My climbing partner, Conrad Yager, and I were going to attempt to climb three mountains: Illiniza Norte, its sister peak Illiniza Sur, and Ecuador’s fourth highest volcano, Antisana. Our tour would take us on a 500-mile, counterclockwise circuit through the center of the country where we would walk among high Andean mountains, vast grassy plains, and damp, dense jungle.

Vega is a spry man with only a score of chin whiskers and chiseled forearms. He climbs hard in the mountains. He has summited Antisana, arguably Ecuador’s most difficult peak, around 25 times. He drives a 1987 Toyota Land Cruiser that needs a new battery. He always parks facing downhill, routinely popping the clutch to start the rusty machine. Vega dropped us at the Hostel Charles Darwin, a pleasant mid-range hotel in a quiet corner of Quito’s New Town. We rested and in the morning set out to find a



The author’s hiking companion, Conrad Yager, looks toward Antisana’s summit. With time exposure, a headlamp trail streaks across the night sky at Antisana base camp.

ECUADOR, Page M2



PHOTOS BY BRIAN IRWIN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

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FOOD

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SEPT. 2-5
PINEHURST, N.C.
Pinehurst Food & Wine Festival: This wine-oriented fest at Pinehurst Resort, often called the cradle of American professional golf, concentrates less on lauding already-celebrated labels and more on serious wine education. Festivalgoers can learn the ins and outs of the blind tasting process, for example, explore the characteristics of different clones of a grape variety, or sample the new organic wines of South Africa. Among the guest chefs is Robert Sisca of Boston's Bistro du Midi. Best deals are the packages of lodging, all meals, and all activities. Pinehurst Resort, packages \$280 per person per day, events \$40-\$65. 800-487-4653, www.pinehurstwinefest.com

SEPT. 3-5
WEST JEFFERSON, Ohio
Annual Ox Roast: It might seem like an awful lot of trouble to go to to make roast beef sand-

wiches, but there's something awe-inspiring about cooking 5,500 pounds of round roasts in an underground pit. The 140-foot-long, 4-foot-wide pit is filled with 30 tons of slab wood burned down to glowing coals. The seasoned and foil-wrapped meat is laid in the pit and the whole thing is buried for 10 hours. By 2:30 p.m. on Labor Day, the meat is excavated and the slicing begins to make those sandwiches. The roast beef chowdown climaxes a weekend of parades, beauty contests, a car show, belly dancers, talent shows, and rides and games. Garrette Park, admission and parking free, Labor Day sandwiches \$5.25. 614-879-8818, www.westjeffoxroast.com

SEPT. 13-15
SANTA ROSA, Calif.
The National Heirloom Exposition: Billed as "the World's Pure Food Fair," this initial gathering of farmers, gardeners, seedsmen, and foodies promises to be an



PINEHURST FOOD & WINE FESTIVAL

A Carolina-grown Biltmore Estate wine draws some samplers at the Pinehurst (N.C.) Food & Wine Festival.

all-American take on Slow Food with a focus on the superior taste of heirloom vegetables. Tangy tomatoes with old-time flavor are only the tip of the gastronomic iceberg, and organizers are promising samples of organic heirloom fruits and vegetables grown all over the country. After

you stock up on seeds for next year's garden, visit the nearby Sonoma vineyards. Proceeds benefit school gardens and food programs. Sonoma County Fairgrounds, 1350 Bennett Valley Road, adults \$10, under 18 free. 707-509-5171, www.theheirloomexpo.com

SEPT. 13-18
BARDSTOWN, Ky.
Kentucky Bourbon Festival: We suspect that each of the six days of this festival will begin with the 2011 official drink: a Bluegrass Sunrise of bourbon and orange juice with a dash of grenadine. Folks in Bardstown claim they have been making bourbon since 1776, and that has been cause for celebration ever since. Sour mash makes for sweet times for everything from the Bourbon Breakfast to the free live concerts. Aficionados of the country's contribution to international whiskeydom will enjoy the tastings and mixology sessions. Social butterflies can savor the black-tie dinner and historical tours. The Great Kentucky Bourbon Tasting & Gala, with dinner and dancing, is the climax of the festival. Various venues, including distilleries in surrounding towns, most outdoor events free, ticketed events \$5-\$140. 800-638-4877, www.kybourbonfestival.com

PLAN AHEAD
SEPT. 29-OCT. 2
KANSAS CITY, Mo.
American Royal Barbecue Contest: The season finale for the competitive barbecue circuit is often dubbed the World Series of barbecue as more than 500 teams from across the United States and Canada battle for the grand champion title here. Sauces, seasonings, and (of course) barbecued meat are on sale each day. American Royal Complex, 1701 American Royal Court, \$13. 816-221-9800, www.arbbq.com

PATRICIA HARRIS AND
DAVID LYON

Events are sometimes canceled, rescheduled, or sold out; check online. Patricia Harris and David Lyon can be reached at harris.lyon@verizon.net. Read their food and travel blog at www.hungrytravelers.com.

Breathless about 3 peaks, under the spell of 2 volcanoes

► **ECUADOR**
Continued from Page M1
higher altitude so we could begin to acclimate.

Quito is the second highest capital in the world. Aside from La Paz, Bolivia, it's the only capital where commercial airline pilots have to wear oxygen masks during landing to prevent fainting. Instead of blowing air into the cabin to pressurize it upon landing, in Quito, they suck air out.

Above Quito is the extinct Pinchincha volcano, which we visited on a gondola that glides to 13,400 feet. After a breathtaking ride, we huffed our way into the adjacent valley. Bright insects and roaming llamas wandered the hillside while smoke floated out of a cement lean-to structure; inside a family tended a grill of beef and plantains. After a meal of knobby corn we headed back to the thick, welcoming air of Quito.

In the morning Vega took us two hours east to the pueblo of El Chaupi, where our objectives, Illiniza Norte and Illiniza Sur, towered over the quiet cobblestone road. An enormous statue of a woman milking a cow stands in the center of town. Gauchos clicked their way down the streets. We were about to hire one.

Beyond Chaupi the road falls apart, degrading rapidly into a braided system of deep mud channels. Vega grinned as he drove with one tire in each track. Higher up the path he positioned one tire in a groove and the other high on the embankment, tossing the vehicle into a 30-degree lean. He proudly announced that he has never flipped a car — but he knows friends who have.

At the road's end Vega eased his truck between two árbol de papel, sturdy trees with twisted branches and paper-thin bark. After greeting our gaucho, we loaded our supplies onto the



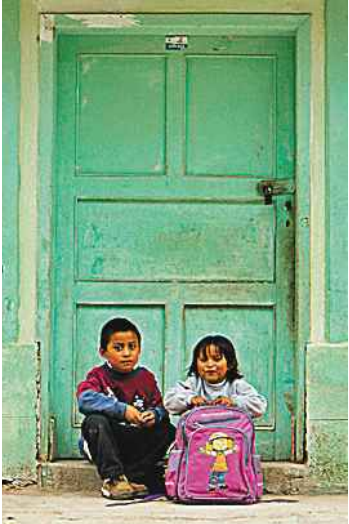
flanks of his horse and hiked for two hours up glacial moraine and sandy hillsides to a rustic, brick hut at 15,200 feet.

The Illiniza Refugio is a dank backcountry shelter that sits in a saddle between the two Illinizas. This depression was once the summit of a conjoined volcano. When it exploded, it left two peaks. One is rocky and suitable for novice mountaineers. The other is more challenging, with withering glaciers and overhanging ice bands.

At sunrise we left for Illiniza Norte, the northern, drier peak. We clambered up pulverized igneous rock, wound our way between spiny rock towers and across steep scree fields until we could scramble to the apex. We stood on the crumbling summit. There a rusty iron cross adorned with prayer flags and memorabilia framed Illiniza Sur just to the south.

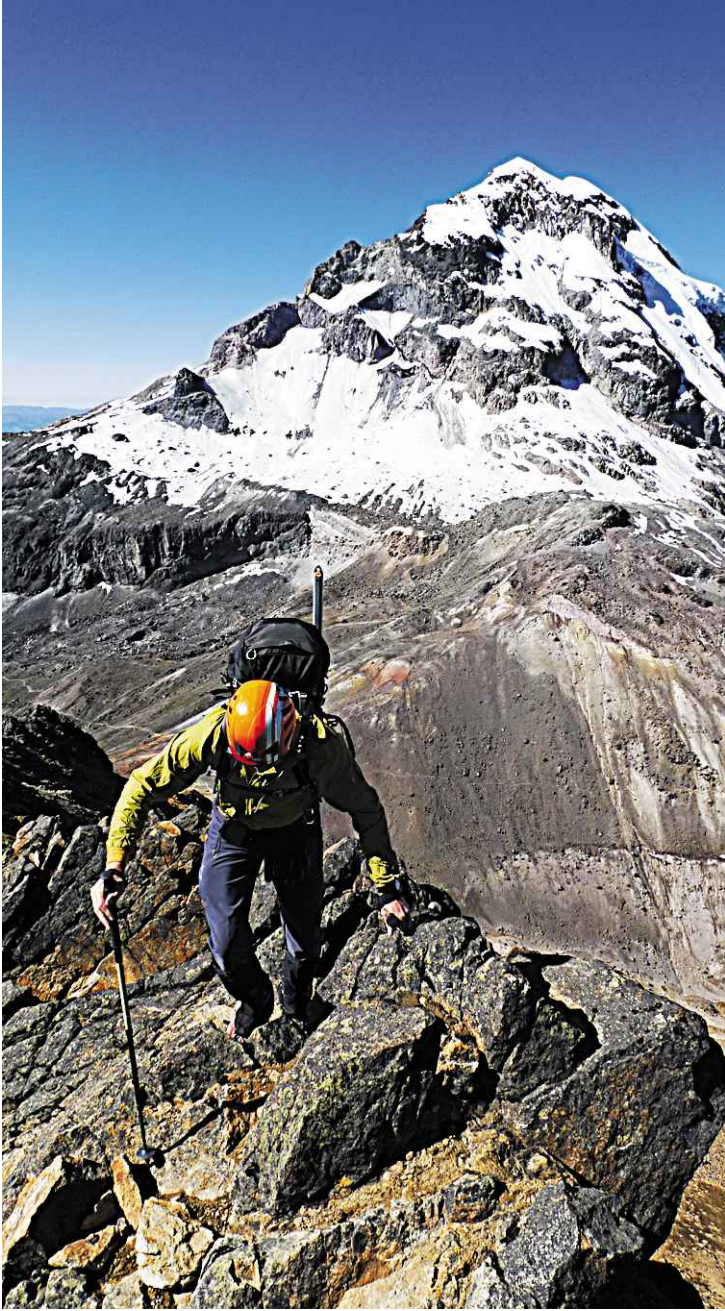
That night I awoke gasping for air. I was Cheyne-Stokes breathing, a phenomenon that occurs at altitude. The body misbehaves when there is little oxygen to breathe. It responds by driving your respiratory rate up to that of a pant, followed by a pause, or apneic period. It feels like someone put a plastic bag over your head in your sleep.

It was 4 a.m. and the snow on



Illiniza Sur would be frozen solid — we hoped. So we left the hut, navigating across the rubble-strewn slopes of Illiniza Sur by the cones of light from our headlamps. We swiftly crossed the mountain's apron, climbed a gully of loose rock, and pulled onto the winding glacier of Illiniza Sur's West Face. Our route was obvious: Ascend 70-degree snow and ice, thread two huge crevasses, and summit. We were the first party of the year to attempt Sur.

We plodded up the steep slopes and approached the summit only to have soft, unsafe snow conditions halt us a few hundred feet from the top. Two



PHOTOS BY BRIAN IRWIN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Llamas on the alpine plateau in Ecuador known as the páramo, overlooking Quito; the author's hiking companion, Conrad Yager, on Illiniza Norte; and children home from school in the Andean village of Pappallatca.

more weeks of baking in the equatorial sun and Sur's snow would be the density of frozen butter and much less likely to avalanche. That day it was unsafe, a disappointing reality to which climbers must submit if they want to live to climb again. In the distance, the conical Cotopaxi volcano, Ecuador's most popular mountaineering objective, towered over the valley.

Leaving the Illinizas behind, Vega coasted with us into the quiet hamlet of Papallacta, where a gravel road led us to Hotel Termes de Papallacta, a lush retreat of grass-roofed cabanas surrounding courtyards bright with lilies. Faucets hidden inside cracked terra-cotta pots pumped crisp, hot, spring-fed water into a dozen tiled pools that wind between the cabanas. In the United States this resort would cost \$600 a night. In Ecuador, it cost a fifth of that.

More impressive than the fine dining (local trout stuffed with mashed casaba), the top-shelf \$8 wine, or the myriad spa options, including a colon evacuation and chocolate immersion bath, was the view. The bulky mass of Antisana, our next objective, towered above the cloud forest, an intermediate zone between Ecuador's eastern jungle and the high grasslands known as the páramo, where shrouds of mist stick to towering stands of trees.

We were only the fourth party this year to attempt Antisana. It's a remote, serious mountain separated from civilization by hours of 4-wheel-drive, cross-country travel. The peak stared over our base camp as we quietly sipped Vega's tomato bisque with potatoes and fresh trout. We were the only climbers, the only people, within 20 miles.

After climbing all night to again take advantage of colder, firmer, safer snow conditions, I climbed up to my friend Conrad's vantage point, the apex of a steep ice ramp on the Antisana's south-east face. It was zero degrees and the air was thin at almost 18,000 feet. The summit block was just starting to glow from the rising sun.

A maze of gaping crevasses spread out before us, each one capped with a thin snow bridge, beyond which a 100-foot-high wall of overhanging ice led to the summit. To our left the glacier spilled 4,000 feet to the páramo. To our right sat a junkyard of azure glacial ice blocks teetering like upended boxcars, oozing an eerie blue light over our heads as we assessed the many uncontrollable hazards and talked about our families. Here, 800 feet from the summit, we turned back.

Our Land Cruiser wound its way up the snaking concrete road and across the páramo toward Baños. After a few hours

If you go . . .

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www.hostalchdarwin.com
Quiet, spacious rooms, an open courtyard, and impressive breakfasts. Only 15 minutes from the airport, \$40 per night, and free Internet and unlimited free calling to the United States included.
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Baños
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www.hotelvillasantaclara.com
Open, villa-style rooms surround a courtyard with fountain. Quiet and secure, \$10 per night.
Hostal Austria
Tarqui y Diaz de Pineda
Tena
011-593-6-288-7205
hostalaustr@gmail.com
A small, family-owned operation directly across from Rios Ecuador and only a block from the footbridge to downtown. Comfortable rooms with hammocks and hot water will surprise you for \$10 per night. Convenient if you are heading to Tena, the next town east of Baños, to white water raft.
What to do
Rios Ecuador
Tarqui 230 y Dias de Pineda
Tena
011-593-6-288-6727
www.riosecuador.com
The classic 25-kilometer Class III float down the Rio Jatunyacu is world famous and costs \$59 per person. The Tena region is a white-water capital of the continent and is only a couple of hours from Baños, so check out other rivers, such as the Upano. Kayak instruction, jungle camping, and multiday float trips are available.
Outfitting Services and Mountain Guiding
Edgar Ricardo Vaca Vega can arrange trips of any length and can tend to any details, from cooking to jungle tours, from climbing expeditions to treks. Custom tours like ours average \$800 per person. edgarguide63@gmail.com
www.edgarguide63.webs.com

the road dropped down into the cloud forest, the pavement steaming from the humidity. As we descended into the vapor, visibility collapsed. At a bend in the road Vega pulled over, shot me a crooked smile, and pointed into the milky sky. The clouds split, revealing the bony summit of Tungurahua. As the Pastaza River roared in the lush valley below, the tip of the dark mountain silently bellowed a puff of black ash high into the sky.

Brian Irwin can be reached at battenkill1@juno.com.



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