

Into the Valley of Longevity

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Eugenia laughed when I asked her how old she was. "Seventy-one," she replied, eyes twinkling. She looked older than her years. Her age spots appeared to merge with one another and deep wrinkles carved a long history across her face. Only fierce energy and

a sharp mind betrayed her relative youth. Eugenia was a great character, but her response wasn't what I had hoped for.

I'd come to Vilcabamba, Ecuador, in the country's southern Loja province bordering Peru, seeking to discover the secret behind its reputation as Valley of Longevity, where residents are said to live to be well over 100 years old. Scientists have debated the claim since 1940 when a census of the valley

revealed above-average numbers of seniors and centenarians. Science aside, if you had to live to be extremely old, Vilcabamba would be the place to do it.

At about 500 kilometres south of the equator and 1,560 metres above sea level, the Vilcabamba Valley has a gentle climate referred to as "perpetual spring." It hovers in a perfect 18 to 28 C all year long, allowing about 500 species of birds, diverse wildlife and up to 3,000 plant varieties to thrive. Soft mountains covered in sub-tropical foliage fold themselves around the village.

The highest peak overlooking Vilcabamba is El Mondango, also known as Alter of the Inca, said to protect the valley from natural disasters.

Some scientists believe the climate, perfectly balanced mineral content in the water, organic diet and healthy lifestyle are behind the valley residents' longevity.

I didn't have much luck finding the famed centenarians. I lurked around the elegant, treed town square, stalking prospective interviewees as they emerged from church. Many seniors passed by, perhaps more than one would expect in a village this size. But those I approached were reluctant to reveal their age; and they wouldn't or couldn't introduce me to any elderly acquaintances.

So I enlisted a cab, a ubiquitous service in Vilcabamba, offered by anyone with a pickup truck.

My cabbie, Rodrigo, assured me several centenarians lived near the village. Why just last month, he informed me, a 121-year-old man had died. When I asked him to introduce me to even one person over 100, he wasn't able to. Instead, for a buck, Rodrigo drove me around the near-empty streets of the sleepy village, past burros tied to posts and thin dogs napping on sidewalks. Whenever we spotted a senior shuffling by, we'd stop. I'd hop out and ask if they could tell me the secret to their longevity.

One jovial oldster laughed heartily at my quest and amiably posed to have her picture taken. But when I asked her how old she was, she coyly declined to tell me and remained girlishly tight-lipped in spite of my cajoling. I approached an ancient man wearing a mis-buttoned plaid cardigan and leaning on a cane. I barely got through my introduction before he stopped me with a brusque wave of his hand, shot me an ill-humoured glance and brushed by me muttering something about nosey gringas.

Rodrigo was getting bored and pushed me for another dollar. The streets were all but deserted. Then I saw Eugenia lounging outside her house. She was my last hope. For her, I was a welcome distraction from the boredom of one more perfect day in paradise.

As we chatted, two of her daughters appeared at the door of their home. They'd overheard her tell me she was 71 years old.

"Not true," one said and berated her mother for lying to me. "You're 95," the other accused, looking at me and shaking her head. Eugenia was outraged.

"What do they know?" she demanded. "They weren't even around then." She looked contemptuously at her daughters. Then she turned to me. She wagged her finger and squinted, challenging me to have the audacity to believe her daughters.

I suggested a birth certificate would settle the argument. However, as scientists had already discovered, birth certificates don't exist to prove how old the valley's residents are. Eugenia didn't have one either. Neither did she understand how a birth certificate would make a difference to her age. I assured her she didn't look a day over 71 and diplomatically bowed out of the family dispute.

Clearly, the Valley of Longevity angle wasn't panning out. Happily, Vilcabamba is a valley of diverse charms and myths to pursue.

Another of the valley's monikers is Playground of the Inca. In the 15th century the Inca used the valley as a royal retreat and spa. Less than 100 years later, they were hiding out and holed up in Vilcabamba. It was their last outpost before Spaniards destroyed them and their culture. Legends tell of Inca gold hidden in the valley.

During the past decades Vilcabamba's mythical reputation has seduced travellers who care to veer slightly off the well-worn South American gringo trail. Some foreigners have stayed, capitalizing on the valley's reputation and opening small spa hotels and retreats. Vilcabamba is a common listing as a retirement and real estate investment destination in international marketing brochures and on websites.

The first person I met in Vilcabamba was Bears, a world-trotting Kiwi who had travelled three days by bus from Cuzco, Peru, to spend two nights at a hostel he'd been told by a reliable source was the best in the world. Then he was heading right back to Peru. The reference impressed me and I followed Bears to the outskirts of town to the nearly empty Las Ruinas de Quinara, a mini-resort for the budget conscious.

On offer for \$12 US was a small private room with bath and three meals. Bears stayed in the empty dorm, forfeited lunch and saved \$2 US.

We had a swimming pool, Jacuzzi, pool and Ping-Pong tables, a basketball court and hammocks strung along lovely garden patios. Small hotels and hostels equally pleasant and wallet-friendly are the norm in Vilcabamba.

The rainy season lasts from October to May and the days I was there were warm, soft rain fell on and off. I walked up the road a couple of kilometres to see the renowned gardens of the American-owned boutique hotel, spa and restaurant Madre Tierra (Mother Earth).

Tucked away up a rock staircase surrounded by verdant gardens overflowing with exotic flowers, I found the spa. I cupped my hands around my face and peered through the window into a long, terracotta-coloured room lined with colourful lounge chairs. Natural light spilled in through skylights; thick ferns and vines grew along doorframes and ledges. It looked inviting.

Outside it continued to drizzle. I was damp.

The spa was offering a 50 per cent discount on a package of treatments and I accepted before they could change their mind. I spent the entire afternoon being pampered like an Inca queen. And I began to grasp the allure of the valley.

After lounging in the Jacuzzi, my attendant, Blanca, led me to one of the colourful chairs. She rigorously conditioned my hair; working in yogurt, aloe vera and olive oil and covering it with a shower cap. Then she smeared my face with a masque of rose water, egg whites, oatmeal, vitamin A and clay. and covered my eyes with carrot slices, leaving me in a deliciously aromatic darkness.

The mood changed with the next treatment: a vigorous facial exfoliation using granulated honey mixed with lemon juice. I felt the miles falling away from my face, accompanied by my outer dermal layer.

Blanca then led me to another room to sit in a wooden steam box that she closed around my neck. A bundle of blood-purifying herbs lay at my feet and infused the air with their scent. Blanca disappeared and left me in the box contemplating the escalating heat. When she finally rescued me, she led me to a stall and hosed me down with icy cold water. I felt a little bit like a sheared lamb. Then she locked me back up in the box.

The second time she came back, she had me sit in a bath of icy-cold water before returning me to my hotbox; the third time, Blanca hosed me down with high-velocity, razor-sharp cold water.

Tingling and invigorated, I went to another room where I lay on a massage table while Blanca rubbed me down like I was a Thanksgiving turkey, exfoliating my body with a blend of aloe vera, egg whites, yogurt, oatmeal, rose water and sea salt.

By this time the cells in my body felt plumper and my wrinkles had been scraped away. Blanca wasn't done with me yet. She led me to a room with an empty ceramic-tiled tub and handed me a pail full of hot clay mined from the virgin earth of the revered El Mondango. I completely covered my body with it and sat in the tub meditating on the process of rejuvenation until Blanca returned to tell me it was time to shower.

A foot massage punctuated my afternoon and I strode down the hill, full of vigour and energy.

At the hostel, Bears told me I looked great, more relaxed and yes, even younger than I was earlier in the day. I believed him.

In spite of my girl-reporter need for hard facts, I had stumbled across the unquantifiable magic and the powerful healing of Vilcabamba. Under the patient gaze of El Mondango, I had uncovered one of Vilcabamba's secrets to longevity: you have to take the time to add the hours onto your life.

Now, if only I could find the hidden Inca gold.

If You Go:

- Madre Tierra Hotel Spa & Restaurant -- I didn't stay at the hotel, but guests I met were delighted with their cabin, tucked away in the terraced gardens. All 18 rooms have private baths and hot water 24 hours a day. Rates begin at \$39 US per night.

- Produce used for meals in the restaurant is organically grown on the hotel's farm.

- Prices for my spa treatments were: \$8 for the hair conditioning; \$8 for the facial; \$9 for the blood- purifying steam; \$12 for the sea salt massage; \$8 for the hot clay treatment; \$9 for the foot massage.

- For more information, contact: info@madretierrahotel.com.